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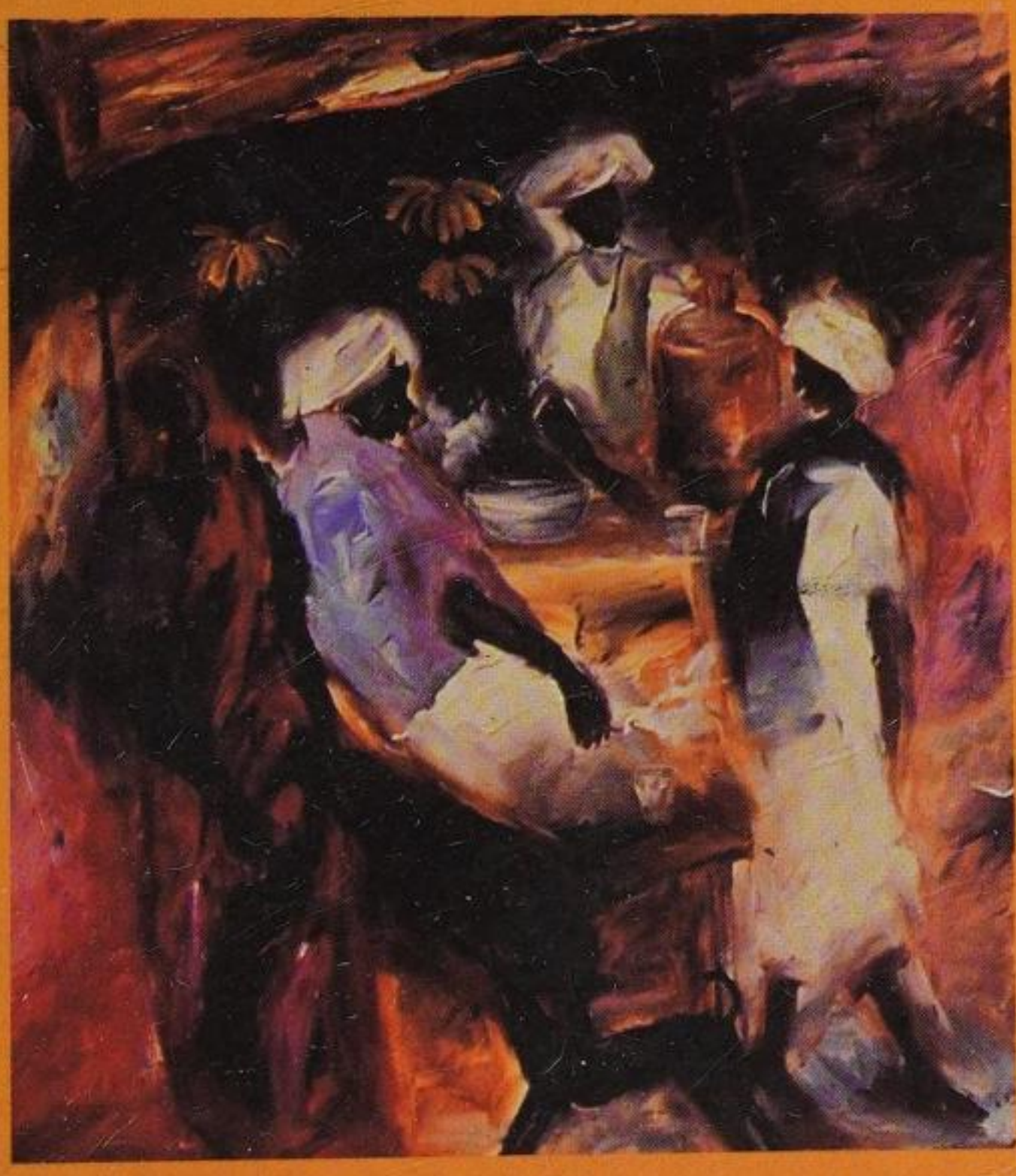
MODERN INDIAN NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

U.R. Anantha Murthy

Bharathipura



Translated from the Kannada original
by P. Sreenivasa Rao

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SHOUT
SHARE
IT

BHARATHIPURA

Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.

- Jnaneshwar

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U. R. Anantha Murthy
BHARATHIPURA

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About this series

Whatever our quarrels and shifting factions, all Indians know that they have a complex, stable system of values, beliefs and practices which — though forged long ago — has never really been interrupted. It still underlines the surface differences and makes them comprehensible. Our programme of translations is an exploration of this Indian tradition which is one of humankind's most enduring attempts to create an order of existence that would make life both tolerable and meaningful.

The method we have adopted is to translate selections from the corpus of fiction Indians have created after their Independence (1947). It is our hope that these novels will express most of the ideas, customs, unquestioned assumptions and the persistent doubts that have characterised Indian life for at least a thousand years, and, more recently, after the impact of western ways of thinking on it.

Novels from Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi have been selected. We hope to include more Indian languages in the next phase.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of MR. AR. Educational Trust, of which Sri A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Trustee. Known to us, there has never been such a big and systematic programme of translations sponsored by the private sector.

Some of the footnotes may seem excessive, but they have been prepared with non-Indian readers in mind.

Mini Krishnan
Project Editor

Introduction

Anantha Murthy wrote *Bharathipura* while he stayed with the dramatist Subbanna in Heggodu, a small village in Malenad, set in the hilly regions of Karnataka. This minor detail introduces us to some of the major themes of the novel, because *Bharathipura* has fictionalised the historical experiences of this very part of the country. The said village which has a deceptive and sleepy appearance has survived all the traumatic experiences of post-Independence India. Heggodu is a conservative little village dominated by Havyaka Brahmins, a community known for Vedic learning, gambling and farming. The novel could not have chosen a better place for its birth. Brahminical orthodoxy has faced many complex challenges in the form of inter-caste marriages encouraged by Subbanna's innocent-looking theatre activities. Consequently theatre was seen as a not so desirable activity by the caste-Hindu orthodoxy in the past.

One winter afternoon, in Heggodu, Anantha Murthy showed me an old tiled house from a distance and said- "Nagaraja, you know, the novel *Bharathipura* was born of a photograph I once saw in that house. It was the photograph of a widow remarriage, and you should have seen the confident look on the face of the widow-bride as she posed proudly, book in hand." Probably every novel has some similar image as a moment of conception. Unchanging nature is the only reality here in Malenad. History, that charming seductress, has no place in this idyllic village. Anantha Murthy knows his villages too well to be duped by such romantic pictures of rural India. As a writer born and brought up in Malenad, he captures brilliantly the various moods of nature in his fiction, but as a political activist trained in the Lohiaite brand of socialism, he also shows the tricks played by history on these beautiful villages. In the present novel the narrator has more of a Lohiaite activist in him than the nature-poet of Malenad. Anantha Murthy has

travelled extensively in this part of Karnataka for the purposes of electioneering or campaigning for the abolition of landlordism. All these experiences must have been waiting in the novelist for both evaluation and expression. Thus was *Bharathipura* born.

Anantha Murthy wrote this novel in the seventies, and naturally it carries all the tensions of those turbulent years of intense discontent which led inexorably to the Emergency (1975). All the major political ideologies were undergoing a painful phase of self-interrogation. Marxism was posing a real threat to democratic socialism because of a profound change in people's attitude to certain Gandhian notions about the self, society and history.

It was a period of self-doubt and despair for the author of *Bharathipura*, and the novel was a sincere and authentic effort to overcome them. The self-image of the political theory of change that informs the novel, also suffers from the above mentioned fear of self-dissolution. To draw on an analogy from the history of English literature, *Bharathipura* is Anantha Murthy's *Tintern Abbey*. Here too one can see the same desperate effort on the part of the writer-revolutionary to reaffirm his commitment to the ideal of revolution. Amidst the rage of self-doubt there is a touching effort to believe again.

II

As a political novel *Bharathipura* interrogates the notion of the ideal revolutionary, and this is certainly in line with the tradition of handling political heroism in the Kannada novel. Political idealism in the Kannada novel has always been a matter of horror for the hero and amusement for the people. In particular, the heroes of two important novelists in Kannada, Kuvempu and Shivram Karanth, are cured of their revolutionary excesses by the amused indifference of the people towards the project of emancipation. It is not only an intense mistrust of super revolutionaries but also a subtle endorsement of the political wisdom of the masses. The self-love of the protagonist, usually the alter-ego of the novelist, is transformed into a gentle self-questioning process. In *Bharathipura* the act of self-interrogation assumes sad and melancholic undertones, providing a sharp contrast with

the classics of the epic-dramatic novel tradition of the previous generation.

III

A rebel is made in two ways; either out of sheer organic necessity, or as an expression of ontological necessity. In other words, for Jagannatha to rebel is not a personal necessity, for he is not a direct victim of the structures of humiliation and deprivation that he is fighting. But he is driven by a deeper desire to establish a more humane and meaningful relationship with the world. Not withstanding the inherent pull towards the organic mode of revolt in it, even Bolshevik politics has large chunks of ontological necessities built into it. Strangely, Gandhian praxis too is essentially a product of the ontological necessity school, and the Gandhian approach to the question of untouchability is shaped by such impulses. For students of literature, *Bharathipura* is important because it explores the tragic separation between organic and ontological necessities, where the latter is forced to carry the halo of martyrdom and despair. Acts of revolt have a quality of aesthetic convulsion about them. The novel presents the rebel's grandeur, misery and sentimental attachment to his cause which in a moment of crisis transforms itself into pure hatred of the *subjects* of his cause.

In particular, the shaligrama (see Ch. Fourteen) episode which acts as the fulcrum for the entire novel deserves a close reading not only because it reveals the basic theme of the novel in its most intense form but because it also serves as a pointer to understand the structural problems of narration. Jagannatha wants the untouchables to touch and by this act defile, the holy shaligrama. The hero himself is aware of the irony and paradoxes of the situation he has created. The line that separates farce from tragedy has become rather thin, and the narrative effortlessly establishes this polyphonic truth. Is Jagannatha the Brahmana rebel really destroying the aura of power that surrounds the holy stone? Or is he privileging the shaligrama by default? This is a tricky question and the novelist is truthful enough to allow a play of multiple readings of the event but, now and then, he tries to convince the reader that it is genuinely tragic in its essentials. He is trying to utterly destroy the

eternal source which mystifies in order to sustain a certain kind of power and authority and here we stumble upon one of the major achievements of the novel. An act of negation ironically leads to the affirmation of the same, and the entire novel revolves round this paradox. The shaligrama episode brings to the fore all the ugly and authoritarian elements in the hero. The depth of his self-obsession frightens the Dalits and his tragic pleading mystifies them even further.

In terms of political psychology this chapter on the whole, has tremendous significance, and it also gives us the philosophical vision that informs the novel. A certain kind of super revolutionary, whatever be his or her ideological moorings, treats the world and its people as meaningless things. S/he has to invest them with meaning. The will to create such meaning may also destroy both the self-respect and self-image of the objects of change.

What is experienced as a momentary disappearance of the human element in Jagannatha solidifies over a period of time in the history of ideologies as historic necessity. This is the unavoidable conflict between the present and the future. In Girish Karnad's classic Kannada play *Tughlaq* the same theme is explored, and the king justifies his bloodshed and cruelty in the name of a glorious tomorrow. The obsession with the historical hardly respects the existential and the quotidian. Jagannatha's will to change runs the danger of transforming into a Tughlakian kind of obsession with change and the halo of martyrdom that accompanies it. As stated earlier, some of the classics in modern Kannada literature seem to have this intense distrust of the "hero" as their world view. In the case of *Bharathipura* the hero is depicted with somewhat excessive love and care but in the end he is presented with all his weaknesses exposed.

The shaligrama episode can be treated as a critique of the very notion of "change from above" in its different incarnations, and the novel itself has enough internal evidence to substantiate such a reading.

IV

The aesthetic ideology of the author has, in many ways, determined the political understanding of the novel. This aspect takes us to a debate on the very nature of the Navya literary movement of the 1960s and 70s of which Anantha Murthy is one of the leading lights. The Navya mode of writing believed in the values of sincerity and authenticity, two features deeply rooted in the existential reality of experience. This was also described as the commitment to the medium by Anantha Murthy himself. In other words, such aesthetics placed a higher premium on the organic mode of rebellion than the ontological mode for the simple reason that the former is a product of both tangible and concrete experiences. Precisely for this reason, the great radical act of defiling the sacred shaligrama appears a little too sentimental and awkward. Ganesha's revolutionary act of defiling the idol of God acquires an aura of both sincerity and authenticity in comparison with the complicated behaviour of the foreign-returned revolutionary. For Jagannatha everything is symbolic but for Ganesha even the symbol is frighteningly real. Ganesha's anguish has a touch of poignancy about it which is not contaminated by problems of imaging the self.

Ganesha's fury has a touching clarity about it. His revolt is the manifestation of the organic mode of rebellion. For him, the act of rebellion is not an abstract spiritual need, but a concrete physical one. It is in fact a revolt against his quotidian experience controlled by Manjunatha. Hence it is also a revolt against the prasada Manjunatha gives him.

Dislodging the lingam is, for Ganesha, an expression of his immediate need. For Ganesha—who is in search of internal freedom—freedom is the recognition of necessity, even in the metaphysical sense. The section following this episode is characterized by restraint and intensity. One cannot miss the contrast between the shaligrama episode discussed earlier and this one. The organic relationship between the mental state and the objective world enriches the tone of the event. The passage is in fact one of the best ones in the novel.

But the system manipulates Ganesha's act of rebellion for its own survival. His sacrilegious act is exploited by society to strengthen its own temporal and sacred power. The cracks

under the lingam remain a secret and the temple as well as the system it represents, swallow the challenges thrown at them.

One of the interesting aspects of the novel is the fact that while Jagannatha represents the ontological mode of rebellion, it is not the untouchables led by Jagannatha who represent the organic mode of rebellion. Unsurprisingly, it is Ganesha who is its inarticulate representative.

Jagannatha's excessive self-love prevents him from becoming an effective rebel,whereas other political activists in the novel like Neelakantaswamy appear to lack genuine moral reflexes. The novel becomes an enquiry into the very nature of change and rebellion thus allowing people with different moral characters and ideological persuasions to offer their evidence and cross-examine their rivals and other viewpoints. The novel is saved from becoming a thesis-novel by the active presence of two factors: the organic web of everyday relationships and women. It is the women who have transformed the ideas of the other people in the novel.

The philosophical fascination of the narrative viewpoint tries to privilege the character of Jagannatha at the cost of others and the resistance offered against it by the humanist and the artist persona has made this novel rich with subtle aesthetic tensions. Women try to bring sanity and order into a world which is torn by violent efforts of different kinds to dislocate the equilibrium. They also suffer in the bargain. The fact that the novel is extremely sensitive to the inner world of women is largely responsible for its narrow escape from becoming a high brow theoretical novel of the aggressive male variety. Here too the aesthetic ideology of the novel plays a significant role in focusing the creative interest on concrete experiences of women, rather than on abstract metaphysical speculations.

Another interesting presence that has made the novel a complex work of art is the world of traditional viewpoints ably represented by conservative Brahmins. The sophistication of their well articulated positions is matched only by the equally coherent ideas held by westerners, socialists, Marxists and the Gandhians in the novel. The existential details about the people in the novel make them real and less fascinating but the presence of ideas in their lives transforms them into

colourful human beings. Life hurts people into philosophy, and *Bharathipura* mirrors this truth tirelessly using different strata of society.

Yet another hidden motif of the novel should be disscussed here. It deals with the connection between Jagannatha's suspicions about his mother's honour and his rebellion against the caste system. The Lohiaite perspective of the segregation of caste and sex throws light on this particular aspect. By provoking the untouchables to enter the temple, Jagannatha tries to transcend both caste and sex segregation. Upto a certain extent the two remained separate in his consciousness and the moment he realizes the link between them, he understands his dual nature too. This realization accounts for a new phase of ideological growth in him.

The need for the organic mode of rebellion strikes Jagannatha too, just as it struck Ganesha deeply. However, the novel does not explore this aspect in Jagannatha and he continues to remain a representative of the ontological mode of rebellion. But his character acquires a greater depth as his revolutionary impulses strong, yet unconscious, press upon him with a personal urgency. What is striking here is the irony that even a revolutionary representative of the new generation like Jagannatha should seek justification for certain acts in his mother's life.

V

Perhaps one can analyse *Bharathipura* by Forsterian categories regarding the different aspects of the novel. The novel has all the external characteristics of a realist novel; it seeks to break the rules of realism from within and this is done mainly through the non-instrumentalist approach that we see towards the use of language; and passages of sheer poetic brilliance abound in the novel. It demands the reader's attention to discern the subtle shifts in the narrative strategy that takes the novel to non-realist modes of writing.

To situate the novel in the context of the international history of the novel tradition, one can begin by placing it along with the nineteenth century masters of Russian realism, though

Bharathipura strikes a different stance in terms of poetic and symbolic modes of narration. In *Bharathipura* there is a localisation of theme that brings the larger themes into the orbit of the local by symbolising them. Needless to say this is in marked contrast with the Tolstoyean mode where the larger is also treated in a realistic vein, arranging the encounters between real historical figures being an integral part of the design. The storyteller in *Bharathipura* has a doggedness and determination never to leave his local habitat, it is like the working of a medieval alchemist where the entire cosmos arrives on his table. In fact even the temple which is at the centre of the novel is one such master-symbol which signifies an overdetermination of multiple readings of Indian history. Many explosive things are squeezed into a sleepy little town, and the place is seeking to burst open both literally and metaphorically.

What distinguishes *Bharathipura* from the Marquezian or Kunderian novel is the absence of an interpretative mode which uses large doses of irony to weave the macro-historical events into the narrative pattern of the local. The larger macro-history is present in these novelists more as the connecting job of the narration than the actual events that form an integral part of the story in question. Though epoch-making events appear in their novels, they are brought in to highlight some major aspects of the life of the common people which lie undetected or to show the impact of the larger historical forces on the life of the common man. *Bharathipura* steers clear of such efforts to link the ordinary and the fictional with the larger historical events, hence the absence of ironical or comical viewpoints in the novel. The larger historical events are converted into episodic material in the fictional mode. The value system of the novel which firmly believes in master narratives suffers a severe jolt in the end. The hero or the narrative viewpoint, however, does not specifically say goodbye to these much cherished values of modern India but the strain on them is deeply felt. There are no signs of Jagannatha becoming a renegade in the end. Thus the novel successfully avoids the easily available mode of political atonement and disillusionment.

VI

Soon after the publication of *Bharathipura*, there arose, expectedly, a heated debate on the artistic merits and the political desirability of the novel. Even the socialists were divided over the merits of their much celebrated comrade's second novel. They had no problems whatsoever in endorsing the world view of his first novel *Samskara*, for it was a product of Lohiaite melancholy and rage against the caste system. What was the "message" of *Bharathipura*? Some argued that the novel was a passionate statement of disillusionment with the very idea of change and revolution, while others questioned this reading and said that Anantha Murthy was only trying to criticize the radical self-esteem of the middle classes. What really drew criticism was the portrayal of Dalits and the lack of interiority in their characterisation. It is perfectly understandable if Dalits are seen as lifeless objects by the protagonist, but what if the narrative viewpoint also unconsciously reinforces such a perception? Incidentally, two socialist-friends of Anantha Murthy's, S. Venkataram and K.V. Subbanna wrote fairly sympathetic analyses of the novel. But the issue is far from settled even today, and any serious critical engagement with the novel demands a deep scrutiny of the issue. Any simplistic conclusion either way tends to ignore the complex relationship between the conscious ideology of the novelist and the autonomous politics of its style and form.

The point to note is that *Bharathipura* is a novel enmeshed in the vicissitudes of life in post-Independent India. The strength of the novel lies in its attempt to mirror apocalyptic changes that have enveloped the country. As far as the external details of the novel go, it appears to be confined to a Gandhian tale of torturous self-privileging. While that is only the fictional context, the politics of the novel will not suffer any substantial change if the Gandhian motif is replaced by the left-extremist stance. The novel is essentially a critique of the limitations of the radical middle classes, claiming an exclusive and sympathetic right to change the nation.

Against this background, *Bharathipura* grows into the present times leaving behind the years of its birth. The themes and problems it tries to tackle have continued to haunt us in the present decade too. That is how history tries to catch up with

fiction, it does not want to get beaten up by an imaginary tale. All good novels go beyond history and assert their relevance, and certainly *Bharathipura* is no exception.

D.R. NAGARAJ

One

When he walked alone, Jagannatha did not go around the puddles, he leapt over them. Especially on a nippy December day with its soft sunlight, he loved to walk briskly. He had set off telling Chikki that he was going downtown to meet Sripathi Rao. As he sped downhill, plucking leaves and inhaling their scent, he ran into Belthangadi Narahari Rao—turban on his head, rings in his ears, face wrinkled and eyes anxious. He asked Jagannatha, "On your way to the temple?"

Narahari Rao's palms met in greeting, while still holding both his bag and umbrella; the once black umbrella was ashen and patched up in a hundred places; one of the earrings had lost its stone; his dusty feet were bare.

"No, not to the temple, I was just going downtown."

Jagannatha waited for a response. Narahari Rao frantically searched his pocket. Jagannatha was in a dilemma—was it proper for him to leave without offering Narahari Rao a cup of coffee?

"Please, Mr. Narahari Rao. Go to my house and have some coffee. I'll be back this afternoon."

Jagannatha hitched his dhoti up about his knees. There was some impatience in his eyes. Narahari Rao desperately rummaged in both pockets. Jagannatha could not guess what it was that Narahari Rao was looking for. Finally, he pulled out a piece of paper and showed it to Jagannatha saying apologetically. "I thought that you had written to me this way because you're upset that I have not repaid the loan I took from your father. What can I do? I went bankrupt marrying off five daughters. Besides, the crop failed this year."

Jagannatha now knew the reason for Narahari Rao's anxiety. Probably, he had failed to express himself clearly, what with having to write more than a hundred such letters. He said "No. No. Narahari Rao, you've misunderstood me. My letter says

that you don't have to repay me. What my father, and after him, his assistant did — this money-lending business, collection of interest, in the name of the Lord and offering it all in prayer to Lord Manjunatha[1] — I dislike intensely. I have said the same thing to other borrowers too. Don't worry. Go to my house now. We will talk about it later."

Jagannatha felt that Narahari Rao's face did not register any comprehension. He still looked abject. His toothless mouth tried to smile as if it had to — that was all. Big bag and umbrella still in place, Narahari Rao folded his hands again and stood silent and wondered what pleasantries he could say.

Jagannatha repeated his polite invitation to Narahari Rao and walked off. He did think of the consequences when he tore up all the promissory notes. To cut off this lender-borrower relationship was to cut asunder the principal link between him and these people. He would have to forge some other bond. He should look for it. Sipping Chikki's coffee, Narahari Rao would feel confused and wonder why Jagannatha had written off thousands of rupees. What would happen if he wanted to borrow again? Chikki too would be anxious. Secretly, she would place another talisman under her pillow. She would pray harder, promise more offerings. She knew that Jagannatha had resigned from his trusteeship of the Manjunatha temple. Whispered rumours were afloat all around town. When the President of the country had come to worship Lord Manjunatha, Jagannatha had been invited. And Chikki had felt elated. But Jagannatha's refusal to go had frustrated her. That very day, he had resigned his trusteeship.

Jagannatha came down the hill rapidly and joined the road that led downtown. Within a furlong was the shopping centre, a world of different flavours. Smoke-filled restaurants with the smell of spicy Indian rice cakes. Barber shops with standing mirrors that made the pedestrians' faces long or broad. Jagannatha walked down, looking ahead. He was afraid that someone or other would stand up and ask about his welfare. Why had he come walking and not driving his car? Another would simply stand and stare. Or else, this other would walk some distance

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[1] the local deity; another name for Lord Shiva.

with him feeling obliged to keep him company. And everyone would ask whether he was going to the temple.

Jagannatha walked past the Vokkaliga Hostel. To its right stood the High School which he had attended, run under the auspices of Lord Manjunatha. A group of boys were playing volley ball. The school had not grown beyond a couple of rooms. A week ago, the town's legislator, Gurappa Gowda, had urged him to help build a new wing in his mother's name. Jagannatha had merely said, "Let's see." He had tried to argue that the money spent in covering the main road with red top soil in honour of the President's visit was a waste, only to give up in utter frustration. Past the High School, on another hill, was the Traveller's Bungalow. It was said that once long ago the town had arranged for Gandhi to stay there, but Gandhi had gone straight to the ghetto of the untouchables. Jagannatha's father, one of the town's leading citizens, had had to go too. However, he had gone through the rite of purification soon afterwards by swallowing panchagavya—a mixture of five products from the cow: milk, curds, ghee, urine and dung. Jagannatha had heard the story from Sripathi Rao. Only Gandhi, it seemed, had not visited the temple of Lord Manjunatha. Now, however, there was no minister who had not received the Lord's prasada[1] from the temple.

Beyond this point, the shopping centre divided into several rotten stinking streets. The centre was in the valley, an offshoot of Lord Manjunatha's establishment. It had grown haphazardly in all directions, with a strong stench of urine at every street corner. On the walls, ancient advertisements for "Liver Cure." And "Vote for Gurappa Gowda" signs of recent days. Peasants walked up and down the shopping streets; Deeva[2] women with colourful rings in their ears and pierced noses. Their heads covered with tightly plaited hair and a heavy load of flowers. Village folk came in bullock carts to celebrate a wedding at the temple or to know their future prospects from Bhootharaya[3], the Lord of the lower castes. Or to buy sarees and blouses. They

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[1] a portion of food, fruit, flowers, etc. that has been presented to an idol, given to a worshipper as a blessing.

[2] a caste in south Kanara traditionally associated with toddy tapping.

[3] an awe-inspiring spirit worshipped by people.

went round the shopping centre in great excitement. Busy. Noisy. A boy would pester his mother for a balloon, having spotted one in another's hand. After everything was done, the village folk would eat some batter-fried vegetables, drink coffee and leave, carrying with them another lot of the deep-fried stuff. Jagannatha had not forgotten a thing even though he had been in England for five years. Did that mean that nothing had changed here? Or was he blind to the changes, if any?

Those seated on benches in the stores that lined the streets worried over whether Jagannatha would see them and whether they should stand up. He walked past them as if driven by something urgent. Here and there, he could even see a few trouser-clad youngsters. Probably, the children of visiting pilgrims. But the "shop-sitters" were all familiar faces. There they were, digesting their breakfast of beaten fried rice or spicy rice cakes. Their women spent the entire day cooking on smoky wood fires. Here, in the market place, the men sat in comfortable, silent clubbiness and watched the faces of new pilgrims who arrived every day. The same pattern: they would sit there till lunch time and then head home, or if there was trouble at home, go to the temple for lunch. Generally, they lived by their faith in Lord Manjunatha. They had their bits of farmland in some village which some faceless tenant trod through mush and ploughed. Frightened by Bhootharaya, he promptly paid the tenancy money. He also gave bananas and vegetables and thus did these idlers manage to feed themselves and survive. Someone gave birth. Someone else died. Every year, a few were born, a few died, a few got married—somehow time moved, life went on. Hair would turn grey, teeth would fall out.

Jagannatha felt frightened. In the letter he composed in his imagination to Margaret, he wrote: *there is nothing creative and Lord Manjunatha is the cancer of life here. The market place is a cancerous growth, a tribute to Lord Manjunatha.*

The first bus from Shimoga of the Manjunatha Bus Service arrived kicking up a dust storm. It drove to the end of a street and halted. The bus stopped the same way at the end of every street. Brahmin[1] boys in dhotis[2] crowded round the

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[1] the highest caste among the Hindus.

[2] a sarong like length of cloth worn by men around the waist.

pilgrims and pestered them: "Come to our house please. Come to our house." If the visitors appeared to be from outside the state, they would badger them in Hindi. There was a free lodging house for visitors built by Jagannatha's father, but it was inadequate. After some haggling over rates, the boys would pick up the luggage of the pilgrims. A ritual bath in the river, would be followed by a visit to the temple, a ceremony for dead forefathers, a trip to the shrines, homage to Bhootharaya atop the hill, reservation of return seats — all these would be contracted for and then the Brahmin boys would take the pilgrims home. Sometimes, two boys from the same house would pretend to compete to raise the price. Finally, the pilgrims would take their children to smoke-filled multistoried buildings to spend a couple of days. The old market place saw new faces day after day.

"Jagannatha Rayare[1], namaskara[2]. It seems you are on your way to the temple?" Did they all ask this to mock me, or was it merely a habit? Jagannatha turned to his right to find a man with folded hands and a smile. He was Nagaraja Jois, famous in town as the creator of the Hindu almanac. He had also written hymns of praise in Sanskrit to the nation's President and published them himself. His son was a lawyer in Shimoga. He used to relate with relish and a grin, the story of how he had written satirical verses in Sanskrit about the Matadhipathi,[3] who had excommunicated him for computing planetary movements according to the English system, abandoning the traditional Hindu method. The shrewd Jois knew that he was modern enough and what he did suited him. Actually, he could even argue that God did not exist. The point however was that his cousin, Seetharamaiah, was the chief priest at the Manjunatha temple and naturally Jois was jealous.

Jagannatha succumbed to Jois' entreaties and went to his house. Nagaraja Jois' younger son came home empty-handed, without a guest-pilgrim. He said that a family from Bellary had gone to Udupa's house. Though disappointed, Jois pacified his son and asked him to wait for the second bus. He offered Jagannatha a chair, but Jagannatha really did not want to stay on. He

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[1] a term used to address men respectfully, like "mister."

[2] symbolic verbal greeting meaning "I bow before you."

[3] head of a mutt or religious centre, a preceptor.

then asked Jois about his advocate son. Jois' response was a bitter complaint. How could any advocate hope to have briefs when all appeals were made only to Bhootharaya? He brought his shining red earrings and red teeth close to Jagannatha, sat down and started conversing in an intimate tone. Jagannatha felt that this must be a very sacred day. Jois' head and face were shaved clean. And he was wearing a necklace of beads set in gold. The attraction Jois held for the pilgrims must be these — the red earrings, the gold, the disarming talk, the tone of intimacy as he sat close to his listener.

"Jagannatha Rayare, the claim that Lord Manjunatha was installed here by Lord Parashurama[1] is false. If some researcher were to dig up the linga,[2] this falsity can be proved. Actually, the linga already has a crack and is only three inches deep. Do you know why? Because, it was really Yadutheertha Swami who installed it. Ask me, and I will tell you. But people may reject my argument alleging that I am jealous of my cousin, the chief priest."

And Jois came closer still. He whispered even more softly, opening his eyes wider. "Listen. you're a well-read man and you understand things. Tell me, is there any room for Bhootharaya's worship in Advaitha philosophy[3]? Tell me the truth." Nagaraja Jois' voice dropped even lower as he stared at Jagannatha. Jois went on.

"Tell me, who do the people fear? To whom did the President of the country pray? Tell me who decides where all the offerings made to Lord Manjunatha should go?"

Nagaraja Jois watched Jagannatha silently for a minute. And added, "All the prayers, pledges and worship offered in the name of Lord Manjunatha go to Bhootharaya, the Lord of the lower castes. Why do they offer Bhootharaya red rice? Why do the temple boys of Bhootharaya wear red clothes? Why is the symbol

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[1] Rama of the axe. He is considered to be the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, and belongs to the period of the first struggle between the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas.

[2] the symbol of Shiva's creative energy, in the form of a phallus; worshipped by Shaivites, it represents Shiva in temples dedicated to Him.

[3] a philosophy of monism, expounded by Shankara, which states that the soul and godhead are one and the same.

of Lord Manjunatha's blessing — that Bhootharaya wears on his forehead and his chest — red? How come this vermilion is used instead of vibhuti[1]?

Jois pointed at the red on his forehead — a symbol of the blessing of Lord Manjunatha and that of Bhootharaya. He fell silent for a few seconds and started again

"In olden days, the sacrifices offered to Bhootharaya were bloody. Therefore, the question is, what's the connection between Lord Manjunatha and Bhootharaya?"

Nagaraja Jois showed Jagannatha a photo of Lord Manjunatha hanging by the porch wall — a gentle face atop a fist-sized linga and over this little face, a small golden crown.

"Take this crown for instance. When you were a child, you were under a curse. You were unconscious for three days. I held you on my lap and prayed to Lord Mrutyunjaya, the conqueror of death. Subraya Adiga was with me. You may ask him and he will tell you, even after we exorcised the evil spirit from your body, you remained unconscious. So I told your mother to pledge a gold crown to Lord Manjunatha. If I were jealous and did not want the growth of the temple, would I have asked your mother to offer this crown to the Lord? Why am I telling you all this? Well, it's because even though this crown did go to Lord Manjunatha, the prayers to save your life went to Bhootharaya, Lord of the lower castes. That means all the work done in the name of Lord Manjunatha is actually done by Bhootharaya. But do you think a Brahmin should worship the Lord of the lower castes?"

Nagaraja Jois had entangled himself in his own words. By taking the crown's example, he had put Jagannatha's mother herself in the camp of the accused. And that was the farthest thing from his mind. He felt too confused by his own words to continue. Intending to say one thing, he had ended by saying another.

"Well, it's all a matter of people's faith. If this faith hadn't spread through the nation, do you think the President would have come here? He is afraid of a heart attack. Did you see his

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[1] the ashes of cow-dung, given as a blessing to a devotee. Worshippers of Shiva smear the upper parts of their body with holy ash.

beaming face when he left? He was indeed very happy to see my Sanskrit poem which I had framed for him. He took it with him in his presidential jet."

Jagannatha had to suppress a laugh. He asked.

"Jois, you mentioned something about the relationship between Lord Manjunatha and Bhootharaya. Tell me about that."

"You know the native tribals, the ones who wrap knee-length dhotis around themselves, who eat chicken and sheep. Bhootharaya is their Lord. Brahmin priests established Lord Manjunatha over Bhootharaya and got the tribals to serve them and their interests.

"Is that the reason why every decision of Bhootharaya goes against the tenant farmer?"

Nagaraja Jois was too shrewd to miss the irony in Jagannatha's words. However, fearing his talk was leading him into trouble, he said.

"Jagannatha Rayare, this Lord Manjunatha, whatever be the circumstances, is a very exacting God. We have to continue our worship of him faithfully. Lord Manjunatha should never become just an excuse. That's really the gist of what I want to tell you."

Jagannatha saw Jois slip away. He stood up and said "Shastrigale,[1] you should write an article on all this."

"I need your support, Jagannatha Rao. In fact, your mother published my book *Lord Manjunatha's Miracles*. Do you want a copy?

"No, I have one at home," saying which Jagannatha was all set to go.

"Oh! You are leaving without even a cup of coffee."

Jagannatha replied, "Its all right. Some other time."

He stepped into the street, turned, saluted Nagaraja Jois once again and walked away.

Labyrinthine streets. Incapable of creating anything. Sewerless streets which had multiplied with the growing fame of Lord Manjunatha. If untouchables were to refuse to carry headloads of

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[1] a term used to address a Brahmin priest respectfully.

human waste out of town for a week, the stink would pervade even the sanctum sanctorum of Lord Manjunatha. Jagannatha's body shook in utter disgust. Why was it that the shop lined streets with Brahmins and merchants had not produced a single thing of beauty? About ten miles from Bharathipura, there were masons who made pots and pans of stone and carvers of beautiful sandalwood figures. A few miles, away in another village, there were puppeteers. But in the shopping centre of Bharathipura, except for a few festoons and buntings and the red soil cover for the main street (for the President's visit), which had soon turned into a quagmire anyway, there had never been any evidence of beauty whatsoever. Jagannatha walked gingerly to avoid stepping on excrement and entered the somewhat broad Chariot Street.

The greatest creation of this shopping area must be *Lord Manjunatha's Miracles* by Nagaraja Jois, written in the Sanskrit anushtup metre[1]. Jagannatha laughed as he thought of Jois. Jois must be tormented, worrying over the incongruous things he had blurted out. In that little book of his, sold at two annas a copy, he had described the crown that had saved Jagannatha's life: there were also hymns to the crowned Manjunatha praying that the child Jagannatha be granted health, prosperity and long life. There was a saga of the powers and performance of Bhootharaya who meticulously executed every dictate of Lord Manjunatha. There was a whole chapter describing Bharathipura as an adornment to the whole world, splendorous with festoons, buntings, rangoli[2] on the floor, slow-paced, pretty women, gorgeous male and female devotees of Bhootharaya and Seethadevi[3], mother of Lord Manjunatha and Protector of Orphans. Jagannatha added another paragraph to the letter he was writing to Margaret in his imagination: *Margaret, because of things like this nothing happens here. Nothing new. God has made life here sterile...* He felt that many days

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[1] a popular metre in Sanskrit poetry.

[2] auspicious and ornamental designs drawn with various coloured powders on the floor, in front of a house or an idol.

[3] the wife of Rāma the hero in the epic *Rāmāyana*, worshipped as the Mother Principle.

had passed since he wrote to Margaret. He should tell her everything.

Dear Margaret, I went to Delhi a few months ago. The plane was about to take off from Hyderabad when the famed godman Shirali Baba entered. Next to him was a famous scientist, a devout follower of the Baba. The plane also had a few rich businessmen and twenty vice-chancellors on their way to a conference. Margaret, you have to see Shirali Baba to believe his charisma. When the devout scientist raised his hand to turn on the light, the Baba stopped him with a soft touch. The very embodiment of gentleness. Four or five hippie girls from America prostrated before him. Suddenly their hands were filled with sacred ash, thanks to Baba's magic. They ate the ash. Even the air hostess knelt at Baba's feet. He had such cultivated spiritual chivalry that his hand would effortlessly caress his devotee's head before that head could reach Baba's feet. He would open his hand with a smile as sweet as honey. He would then extend the hand and there would suddenly appear in the devotee's hand either ash or a golden tali[1] *. The Baba has invaded and seized all the state houses in the same way. He is the force that can break down the barriers of caste and class. Margaret dear, unless we destroy God, we will never ever be creative. We are all like embryos in the womb of God. We remain unborn. We have not been caught up in the churning of history and we should be!*

"Hello, Vasu..." Jagannatha tapped Vasu on the shoulder. A friend he hadn't seen in ten years. Vasu was about to go into a restaurant. The same gap-toothed smile; longish face and Hitler moustache, hair thinning. He had vermilion[2] on his forehead. One could not believe what one saw. Munching spicy poories and sipping tea at Kaka's, he and Vasu used to discuss revolution all night long when they were classmates at the Intermediate College. And Vasu used to be an effervescent young man ready for any sacrifice, while he, Jagannatha, was the cowardly one: During the 1942 freedom campaign[3], Vasu had not said a word

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[1] a small pendant, ceremonially tied by the bridegroom around the bride's neck, as part of the wedding ritual.

[2] a red powder with which Hindus mark their foreheads; a woman whose husband is dead is supposed to abandon this auspicious practice.

[3] Indian freedom struggle which culminated in her Independence in 1947.

about where he had hidden the uprooted mailbox despite the harsh treatment at the police station. Jagannatha was overcome for a minute by these memories and hugged and pressed Vasu's shoulders. Staring at the vermilion on Vasu's forehead, he said.

"You, rascal! Are you wearing this as a joke?:

Vasu, trying to recover his presence of mind, exclaimed, "It is Jaganna, isn't it?"

Vasu wore trousers and a bush-shirt.

"Come on Vasu. Let's go home." Jagannatha forgot that he had come out to meet Sripathi Rao.

"Vasu, how come you're so thin? When did you return to Bharathipura? Where are you staying? It seems nobody knows your whereabouts."

Vasu's attention was elsewhere. He said, "I have some work to do. I will see you later."

Jagannatha felt disappointed. Vasu did not seem to be as happy to see him as he was to see Vasu. Besides, he looked anaemic. Perhaps the vermilion on his forehead was not a joke. Jagannatha suddenly felt a wall between them. But hiding his feelings, he said,

"Come, Vasu, let's have some coffee."

"Will you come to this restaurant?" Vasu asked in surprise,

"Why not? Don't be stupid, Vasu."

The restaurant's proprietor stood up as soon as he saw Jagannatha. Some farmers also stood up. Jagannatha was embarrassed. It was the first time he had come to a restaurant in this town. The proprietor wiped the black stone table clean and personally escorted Jagannatha and Vasu to it. Several customers — some workers known to Jagannatha — left the room out of deference to Jagannatha. Vasu ordered coffee. The proprietor attended on them personally. Vasu said in a chiding tone,

"Do you realise now how important you are in this town?"

Jagannatha was delighted to hear Vasu's familiar mockery. Sipping warm, fresh, foam-capped coffee, Jagannatha asked "What are you doing now?"

"You know I didn't finish my B.A. degree. My father threw me out. You went to England while I joined a drama group. Later, I started my own theatre company. I earned about thirty thousand rupees which I lost soon after. Those were the days of

prohibition and I brewed and sold illicit liquor and made money. I married a Shetty girl at the Registrar's office. My father swore never to see my face again. Now, I have three children. What good is talk of revolution when, as soon as I go home my wife complains bitterly that there is no rice! I sold brandy under the guise of being a chemist for some time. Then I founded a "Bombay Thrill Show." Local merchants and politicians, lured by the girls in my company, became my friends. I gave it up disgusted at the shame of it all. Now, I want to feel I belong somewhere. So I came back here. Bhootharaya has ordained that I start a sweet meat store here which I'm in the process of establishing."

"Vasu, your life is really the stuff of a picaresque novel. Do you really believe in Bhootharaya?"

"Don't you grant that there is some sort of mystery?" Vasu seemed to be in a hurry to go and added, "Jaganna, life is tough. Well, tell me what you are doing. I heard of your return to Bharatipura and to farming. There are rumours here about your marrying an English girl. Is that true?"

Having asked that, Vasu finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and waited listlessly for Jagannatha's response.

"I did live with an English girl, but I haven't married her."

"Good. That's smart of you, Jaganna. Whatever you did, you had fun in England."

Hearing the word "fun" from Vasu depressed Jagannatha. How close they had been at one time! Where had that Vasu gone? Who was this person? Who or what was he himself? Communication between them seemed impossible. It was true that he and Margaret had lived like man and wife. It was also true that he had not married her... But, it was not for mere fun nor was it smart of him to have come away free and unmarried. It was something else. How could he ever explain that to Vasu? Vasu did not need him now. He was down and out. "Vasu, come home when you are free." Jagannatha got up, having nothing more to say. The restaurant owner would not charge him for the coffee. Jagannatha shook Vasu's hand and walked out.

He walked towards Sripathi Rao's house. He felt he should find new links with life here. It was imperative that he seek fulfilment right here, in this market place. There was no other way for him. A stupor seemed to be spreading again. Was any

action at all possible in this place? Action that would keep him ever sprouting like a mango tree. Jagannatha could see dark faces, dishevelled hair, heads that carried baskets of human faeces in a blurry darkness. Up front, the shining peak of Lord Manjunatha's temple. Behind it, the pure flowing water of the river. Mounds of white sand that made one forget the dirt of the market place. Rocks, rocks that had taught his young feet how to jump. Above the Manjunatha temple, atop a hill.

Bhootharaya with his wet unkempt head, vermilion-smeared body, hand that held a singara, a bunch of areca flowers, dancing, shaking. Lord Manjunatha with his crowned head in the sanctum sanctorum. The bell that filled the whole town with its resounding chime, donated by Jagannatha's forefathers. A clear thought was shaping trying to break into the open through a mixture of these things, in Jagannatha's mind. He had, after all, tried many times to look at this whole thing from several angles. Now... Thus preoccupied, Jagannatha stepped into the dark central hall of Sripathi Rao's house through the open door, deciding to tell all. He stopped and called out.

"Is Mr. Rao home?"

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Sripathi Rao was a longtime friend of Jagannatha's father. He had remained a friend even after Jagannatha's father died, helping Seethadevi, Jagannatha's mother. When Jagannatha left Bharathipura for Mysore for higher studies, his mother's trusted scrivener Krishnaiah also died, making his mother entirely dependent on Sripathi Rao. It was actually Sripathi Rao who had persuaded Jagannatha to go to England. When Jagannatha was wondering whether he, his mother's only son, should go abroad, and expand the range of his experiences, Sripathi Rao, after discussing it with Jagannatha's mother, had determined that Jagannatha should go to England. As Jagannatha had money enough to ruin his mind and creativity, Rao had urged

Jagannatha not to limit his life to the mere enhancement of family fortunes. His mother had agreed.

As she knew the ways of the world, his mother had managed the household and the estate efficiently and satisfactorily. After Krishnaiah's death Sripathi Rao had taken on some of Seethadevi's workload. His mother died suddenly, and Jagannatha had returned from England as soon as he heard the news. He did not know which way to turn. However, Sripathi Rao had sent him back to England to finish his education reassuring Jagannatha, telling him not to worry about things at home.

"Why should you worry, Jaganna? There is Chikki who came to help your mother when you were born. Widowed and childless as she is, is not her sister's son like her own? There is also the shanbogh[1] and I am here. Go back and don't worry about a thing." Chikki had agreed.

That was not all. Sripathi Rao was responsible in many ways for what Jagannatha had become intellectually. Jagannatha was studying for his matric examination at the local high school run under the auspices of Lord Manjunatha during the 1942 Quit India Movement[2]. Sripathi Rao, who actually had made the temple bear the cost of building the high school, was then a regional Congress leader and had played a leading role in the freedom struggle. Jagannatha still vividly remembered Sripathi Rao participating in a sit-in at the Taluk[3] Head Office. He too like Sripathi Rao, had worn a charkha[4]-made khadi[5] shirt and cap, had shouted freedom slogans and been jailed for two days. He had illegally cut down sandalwood trees and picketed the liquor shop. Sripathi Rao, who had read Ingersol, Shaw and Russell, had sown the seeds of skepticism in Jagannatha's mind. Jagannatha's mother had not objected to any of this because

[1] in Karnataka, the revenue officer of the village.

[2] In August 1942 when the proposals of the Cripps Mission were rejected by Indians; the All India Congress Committee unanimously adopted this historic resolution.

[3] a sub-division of a revenue district.

[4] spinning wheel, a symbol of the non-violent, revolutionary movement before attaining Independence.

[5] the word is used specifically to designate the native product as opposed to mill-made fabric from England.

he had done everything in the shadow of Sripathi Rao. His father had worn khadi anyway. And now, his mother too began wearing white khadi sarees. She subscribed to *Harijan*[1], a paper run by Gandhi. Sripathi Rao would come home, read and explain the articles in *Harijan*. Jagannatha, his mother, Chikki, and scrivener Krishnaiah would sit around and listen.

But for Sripathi Rao, Jagannatha would certainly not have encountered a world other than that of Lord Manjunatha in the medieval town of Bharathipura. Now an inactive elder member of the Congress in the state of Mysore, Sripathi Rao had sacrificed everything for the country and been totally ignored after Independence. Jagannatha, agitated by his recent notions, had thought for a few days before deciding to call on Sripathi Rao for a discussion. He had concluded that only Sripathi Rao, who had made a bonfire of mill-made clothes worth thousands of rupees in response to Gandhi's call, would understand his inner turmoil. He hoped for it at any rate.

A fierce argument seemed to be taking place between husband and wife in the kitchen. Jagannatha felt uncomfortable and again called out, "Rayare ..." his eyes slowly got used to the darkness in the hall, and the harum-scarum world there unfolded gradually. A bench placed against the right wall. On it, rolled up beds, soiled, discoloured and perhaps as hard as stone. Portraits of Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose[2] and Nehru[3] with dust-covered garlands made of khadi yarn. On another wall, a picture of Lord Manjunatha with a garland of cotton, probably made by Rao's wife, Bhagyamma. Nails all over the walls. A few childrens' shirts hung from them. Rangoli on the red threshold. Delicately drawn rangoli figures bordering the four walls on the black floor, probably done by Rao's eldest daughter, Savithri. And smoke! Smoke that made the eyes stream. One had to walk with eyes half-shut shielding one's face. The smell of smoke pervaded the wet dhoti, shirts and the blankets inextricably. Rao's wife was muttering something. Rao was screaming.

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[1] people of the lowest caste in the Hindu hierarchy, renamed harijan (Hari means god; jan means people.)by M.K. Gandhi, the architect of Indian Independence; also called the "Father of the nation."

[2] a freedom fighter from Bengal.

[3] a freedom fighter who later became Prime Minister of India.

Suddenly there was silence. Then the sound of Rao's wife using a blowpipe to keep the fire going. Soon after, the loud sound of the blowpipe thumping the floor, in a gesture of total disgust, followed by a cough again, caused by smoke.

"Rayare..."

Jagannatha's sight blurred in the endless billowing of smoke. It must be Rao's eldest daughter Savithri who walked briskly into the hall. The sound of her running feet was followed by the sound of a door being shut to stop the smoke from entering the hall

"Who is it? Is it Jaganna?" Rao came in rubbing his eyes with a piece of cloth wrapped around his shoulders.

He swore. "Damn smoke. Come, let's go upstairs."

Even though there was smoke upstairs too, there was more light. Rao closed the door, opened some windows. Pushing aside some clothes from the bed, he made room for Jagannatha to sit. Jagannatha could see some of Rao's books familiar to him from his boyhood days: Novels of Reynolds printed in small type and in two columns, Scott's novels. Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Light of Asia* and Shaw's plays. On the wall, a photo of Jagannatha's mother. Must have been taken soon after her wedding during the annual festival. A colour picture developed in sunlight, it had gradually faded. Because of that, her round, soft face looked softer. How severely mother used to tie her profuse hair, parting it in the middle!

Rao did not speak. Generally he did not when he met Jagannatha. Jagannatha too would be silent. Being together was in itself immensely satisfying and then, at some moment, chewing betel leaves and arecanuts, Rao would say something that was pregnant with meaning. Jagannatha would instantly grasp the meaning of that one sentence which was indeed a distillation of about ten. Rao might say a few leading words like: "Tell me. You know what Gandhi said. And that Nehru..." And that was enough for Jagannatha to understand Rao's thoughts about current financial policies, politics etc. Or Jagannatha might say: "We are all Indians emotionally, but intellectually we are highly influenced by the West..." and stop

there. This comment would churn in Rao's mind the whole night and emerge linked to other things the next day.

Jagannatha surmised that Rao's tense state of mind might also have been the cause of his silence today. Rao sat there chewing arecanuts and applying chunam[1] to betel leaves. Jagannatha lit his cigarette and looked around for a box to use as an ashtray. He found an old snuff box in a corner. Everyone knew that Rao's wife was addicted to snuff but that she always used it in private, never in her husband's presence. However, it was Rao himself who bought a box every month and left it in a place easily accessible to his wife. When Rao was in jail it was Jagannatha who did this favour for her. Perhaps now, as her son had grown up and her daughter Savithri was a middle school teacher, Rao did not have to buy the snuff for his wife.

White hair cut short, youthful mischievous eyes under thick eyebrows, ears sprouting hair, short, slim, swift of movement—that was Sripathi Rao. He might be seated in a chair, but if enthused about something, he would draw his feet up and squat on his haunches, all in one quick motion. Or else, he would start to pace up and down. But, home was not the place to meet him. There he was always dull. As Jagannatha knew the reason for it, he said, "Come, let's go out."

Rao said, "Wait a minute." The door opened. Rao's wife Bhagyamma brought coffee in two ancient brass cups that had lost their shape. The age of stainless steel had not yet entered Rao's house. Jaggery[2] in coffee which was cold while the cups were warm.

"How are you?" Jagannatha asked Bhagyamma as he sipped his coffee.

"All right, considering everything; Jaganna, how come we haven't seen you for fifteen days?" Bhagyamma spoke in a bored tone, rubbing her nose-ring with the flap of her saree. She was heavily built. Her forehead was small, eyes narrow. Nobody had ever seen her joyous, smiling. The joy of life in her youth—had she lost it sitting day and night before smoke-filled cooking fires and giving birth to her many children? How

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[1] calcium, or quicklime.

[2] molasses allowed to harden; a sugar substitute.

did Sripathi Rao manage to stay supple like tamarind fibre? Their mutually destructive cold war must have been going on for years. Perhaps that was the reason why Rao blossomed the minute he stepped outside the house. Jagannatha had, for the most part, seen failed marriages. Thinking of this, he looked at Bhagyamma. She stood leaning against a pillar, planning to say something. Rao was fidgety. Jagannatha's guess proved to be right. Bhagyamma spoke up.

"Jaganna, I am tired of beating my head against the wall. Will you please try to tell him? If I open my mouth, he pounces on me like a tiger. Savithri has been transferred to Shimoga. Can't he talk to the District Educational Officer and get it cancelled? He gets things done for the whole town. The Minister for Education was his jailmate. So many have taken advantage of this. But nobody cares for us. Following my husband's suggestion, I burned the four silk sarees my father had given me. But whatever I tell him, he sits like a man in a stupor."

Rao, sitting by tense and uneasy said simply, "That's enough. You may go in now."

"Have you heard what happened when he was a candidate for the municipal election? Why should he care for the town when no one respects him? If he can't help his own daughter to stay here. . . ."

Jagannatha tried to pacify her. "Let's see what can be done. I didn't know anything about her transfer." Rao intervened, "Jaganna, you don't know things here. You can't get anything done by the District Educational Officer without a bribe. What can I say if he shows a government order to the effect that those who have served five years in the same place should be transferred?"

Bhagyamma suddenly raised her voice. "He did nothing in time to get his daughter married. And nobody has come forward to marry her. Whether it is because her father has been in jail or because our family follows none of the traditional rites and rules is not clear. At the same time, without her income, how can we survive? Tell me, don't you think, if we have to, we should bribe? First of all, shouldn't we be ashamed to live on our daughter's earnings?"

Jagannatha felt uncomfortable watching Rao burn helplessly with anger. It seemed better to leave. He said calmly.

"Amma, let's do something. If necessary, I myself will go to Shimoga. . . ."

Bhagyamma did not seem to have heard him. She started to scream at her husband. Jagannatha was saddened to see signs of hysteria in an elderly woman.

"Who cares if a man who cannot feed himself shows pride? It is like they say: A poor man's anger is a danger to his own jaw. Our son has finished high school. Has your friend here tried to get him a job? It is true that I sent my son to the bus stop the other day to bring some pilgrims home as paying guests. Don't other Brahmin boys do it? How can we live without money? My son Ranganna brought a family home. He took them to the temple. As soon as he came home, your hero here started leaping about enraged as if he were possessed by a devil. Was I wrong in trying to make some money? Do you know how he beat me up? I who have served him for years without a word? Isn't it because I have lost both my parents that he bullies me? He drove out that family of pilgrims from Shimoga as soon as they came here after prayers. He threw the food I had made for them into the gutter. And he beat up Ranganna mercilessly. . ."

Bhagyamma sank to the floor crying. Savithri who stood behind the door perturbed, pulled her mother up by the shoulder. In a daze Sripathi Rao said, "Let's go." Jagannatha too got up, unable to say anything. As soon as he and Rao got to the street, they got their breath back. In front of them was the temple. Jagannatha said,

"Rayare, shall we go to the riverside?"

Jagannatha found it difficult to look Rao in the eye. But he could not think of leaving him alone in that state. They walked some distance in silence, reached the river and stood on the bank. Jagannatha shuddered in disgust at the putrifying stench. Scorching heat on rock and sand. Pure, flowing river water so soothing to the eye. Waterfalls down the rocks, roaring and foaming. The thrill of young boys bathing in the falls. Pilgrims cautiously stepping into the water. Priests reciting mantras, urging the pilgrims to take a dip in the river. Across the river, the

temple of Lord Hanumantha, the Monkey-God[1]. All along the bank, trees—mango, jackfruit[2] and teak. But wherever there was shade, there rose the same inescapable stink. Jagannatha found it unbearable and suggested they go to the shop. Sripathi Rao agreed.

Jagannatha began the conversation. "Isn't it two or three weeks since I met you?" "There have been moments when, I felt like jumping into the river to end it all." Jagannatha did not like to hear such words from Sripathi Rao. The thought that but for the display of bitterness by his wife, Rao would not have felt as low as this saddened Jagannatha. To change the subject, he said, "Do you know what happened the other day? Rajanna who looks after our affairs in the Kannada[3] region came here, very ill, not to see a doctor, but to offer worship to Lord Manjunatha. He threw away the five hundred rupees he had on sundry offerings to the Lord. I cleverly managed to take him to a doctor who suspected cancer. But he had no money to go to Bangalore for further tests. Though I had to pay for it I hadn't the heart to tell this dying man that he should not squander his money on Lord Manjunatha."

"Jaganna, you know, when my son brought home the pilgrims, I felt as if I had sold my daughter into prostitution. I, who had never lifted a finger in anger, beat up my wife. If Savithri had not intervened, I might have killed her. I did not know that I carried such anger in me. Look how this Lord tried to gobble me up in my weakest moment."

Sripathi Rao laughed as he spoke the last sentence. Jagannatha felt happy that both of them had arrived at the same point. Even so, he felt it would be mean to burden Rao with his plans when Rao was facing a severe crisis. It would be better to talk of things that mattered to no one.

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[1] also called Hanuman, devotee of Rama. The Monkey God's temple is usually outside the village.

[2] tree bearing a fruit resembling bread fruit.

[3] a Dravidian language spoken in the South Indian state of Karnataka.

"Rayare, do you know about this Bhootharaya?"

"There are all kinds of demons, my dear friend—Panjurli[1], Jumadhi[2], Bydar[3], Kaluda[4], Bobbarya[5], Jattigs[6] and so on. These spirits are of the Shudras, the lower castes. There is one of the untouchables[7] too—Kordubbusandhi or some such name. Bhootharaya is the Lord of all these demons. And Manjunatha presides over Bhootharaya as the supreme Lord. If one wants to understand Hinduism, he should come to this temple!"

"Rayare, see how clever we are! We use Bhootharaya to keep our tenant farmers under control!"

Sripathi Rao smiled and asked suggestively whether Jagannatha had met Nagaraja Jois. Jagannatha concluded that his plan had not yet reached Rao's ears. This man, who had once burned everything he had to join the struggle for freedom, might feel no fear at his plan. Right away, he should get Savithri's transfer cancelled; he should employ Rao's son in his own office. Or else Bhagyamma would again drive her son to bring paying guest pilgrims home. And Rao would never accept money for nothing. Jagannatha would have gladly given Rao all the money he needed and said: "Don't worry, pay me later," but he lacked the courage for that.

The two came to Sripathi Rao's khadi store. Ranga had opened up the shop. Inside were rolls and rolls of dusty unsold khadi fabrics. White caps were strung up. A broken charkha. A photo of Gandhi with his toothless smile. Khadi bags with imprints of Gandhi. Rao asked Jagannatha to sit down, which he did, leaning against a pillow.

It was in this very shop that Sripathi Rao had run his freedom campaign and shared new ideas with young men like himself. As Rao took out arecanuts and betel leaves and started to smear the leaves with chunam, he seemed to have left the incident at home behind him. The enthusiasm, humour and mischief in his voice were reflected in Rao's eyes which gleamed below his thick eyebrows. It seemed quite natural for Bhagyamma to hate this man who could not be tamed.

People of the lower castes were hurrying towards the temple. Rao, who watched them, told Jagannatha.

1–6 spirits worshipped by the lower castes.

"The Shudras' food is served outside the temple premises — red rice and green gram soup. Brahmins are served inside — rasam[1] , curry, vegetables and dessert. Jaganna, your family also donates about ten to twelve tons of rice, doesn't it?"

Jagannatha nodded in agreement and Rao continued, "Jaganna I have to do something to stop my wife and daughter going to the temple everyday with plates for free meals."

There was pain in Rao's sarcasm... "*Dearest Margaret, we can restore dignity to man only by destroying God. Otherwise...*"

"Rayare, we have never been involved enough in history to be creative."

"Jaganna, life under Lord Manjunatha's presidency is a happening outside history, in eternity. Isn't that right, Ganesha? Isn't that what your father says?" Rao addressed this last remark to a young man at the door. Ganesha, with a medicine bottle and a wrinkled, discoloured old novel in hand, was flabbergasted. Jagannatha looked curiously at Ganesha whose frame was boyish even though his face bespoke his twenty-five years. Ganesha had a short tuft, and wore a dhoti, with a towel around his shoulders. Vibhuthi on his forehead, big earrings — had Jagannatha seen that young man before? He was not sure.

Rao asked Ganesha, "Isn't your sister well? Have you come to see Doctor Anthony?" Then he turned to Jagannatha and said:

"Jaganna, can't you recognize this young man? He is the eldest son of the chief priest, Seetharamaiah."

Jagannatha said. "Is that right?" "I'm going," said Ganesha and saluted them. Jagannatha returned the greeting and told Rao. "Let's go and eat at our place." Rao instructed Ranganna to mind the shop, picked up his betel-areca box and set off. Vasu joined them as they were about to leave. Jagannatha invited him also. Vasu spoke to Jagannatha.

"It seems you had been to Nagaraja Jois' house. You should have seen his excitement at having you, the richest man in town, visit him. There was no way of stopping his boasts about it. But, Jaganna, don't you ever trust him. You may ask Sripathi Rao

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[1] a spicy lentil soup.

about this fellow. He is still randy at his age. Having tortured his wife to death, he now sleeps with his own daughter-in-law, while his son, poor chap, languishes in Shimoga. Why doesn't he send his daughter-in-law to her husband? He has a lame excuse—he needs someone to manage his busy house and its guests. As for me, I married in the registrar's office for all to see. If I need any extra-marital relations, I go out and pay for it. I won't hide behind the sanctified dhoti and fornicate on the sly like these moribund Brahmins. It seems this Jois is going to file a suit claiming his right to priesthood. Doesn't he know that Bhootharaya lets no case go to court in this district? Then, why does he engage in such anti-social behaviour? This town, Jaganna, is full of selfish bastards intolerant of each others' success. What we need here is a colony of untouchables but we object to their shopping in Brahmin areas. Take your sanctified bowl with you and go to the temple for free meals. That is all. Do people here know anything about back-breaking work?"

Vasu was boiling with anger for no reason at all. Where was that Vasu who had shown no fear at violence simmering in the air, who had refused to yield to baton attacks by the police? Who was this Vasu...? *Margaret, would it ever be possible to remain undistorted in the act of living?* How does one, entangled in the violent conflicts, joys and sorrows of daily life, ensure that action—which turns the wheels of history—is still important? Would Jagannatha be able to make Sripathi Rao, in his present state of mind, think that pure action was important? Were his own thoughts substantial? And to what degree? One should think deeply about all this. That needed solitude. And the faceless, nameless untouchables. Pilla? Kariya? Mada? Could he be resolute without these inheritors of the Bhootharaya tradition, and the wisdom and consent of Sripathi Rao, the elder statesman? How could he persuade them? This market place was a product of centuries of dirt and garbage. If necessary, one should be ready to resort to violence. One should liberate them, have them march ahead into the temple and blossom in a fear-free environment. Loaded carts were heading towards Manjunatha Rice Mills. "Namaskara, returning from the temple?" "This year, we may have a good mango harvest." "One can't be sure though. It may turn cold by the new moon and flowers

might wither away." Voices. A girl at the well, wringing out wet clothes, biting her lower lip, spreading the clothes to dry. Vermilion-smeared Bhootharaya, red cloth wrapped around his waist, with unkempt hair, dancing. Why the dance? For what? As death was inevitable some day, one had to keep on turning over the soil. If only Pilla, Mada, Kariya raised their heads high, ploughed, planted and turned the soil over, if only they could take their first step into the temple, and by that one step, negate the history of centuries and turn its wheels... How could he convince Sripathi Rao that this step was significant? Someone ploughed and grew food. Someone else here ate it. The life-force weakened by the fat of free meals in the name of Lord Manjunatha. Bhootharaya danced and danced to protect and preserve this system. It was a dance without any real meaning!

Hark! The big bell donated by Jagannatha's ancestors. Its sound filled the octopus-like streets of downtown Bharathipura. Bhootharaya danced. Gongs sounded. Dancing with a bunch of areca flowers like a fan in hand. The bell! Daytime's final homage being paid to Lord Manjunatha wrapped in tender green leaves. What a subtle change even here, in these streets that only foodseekers trod. A village buyer. checking a bucket for cracks, putting it down for a second. Transfixed? But this sound and the change were just an illusion.

It was just a reminder that it was lunch time! "The Lord who reactivates the lazy, who makes the tenants pay their dues. The Lord who promises a hundred years to the nation's President suffering from heart disease. The Lord who wears my life-saving crown, who gobbles up the infirm. The Lord who is in the vermilion on one's forehead. The Lord who becomes red-rice and white rice everyday for the sake of thousands of free meal-seekers. The Lord who earns thousands..."

There blossomed a smile on Jagannatha's face. Rao walking briskly, spat chewed tobacco. Jagannatha determined that the untouchables should take that one step in. And through that step, he would start flowing again, transmigrate, regain Margaret. Pilla, Mada, Kariya with her, liberated, would break the rotting market place, the dazed stupefied crowds would start up, feeling a kick in the ass; he would make them feel the

shock, see Bhootharaya dance in every street. But who was Mada? Who was Kariya? Who was Pilla? What where were the links between him, a man of blanched words and Mada, Kariya and Pilla? Through what action could these links be created? There was just his single diffident plan. He waited, words boiling within.

Another bus halted at the toll-gate and Brahmin boys invaded it for pilgrims. Vasu said, "This is the easiest job in the world."

Gurappa Gowda alighted from the bus and saluted Jagannatha and Sripathi Rao... He looked every inch a contemporary Congress leader—dhoti, collarless knee-length shirt, a little paunch. Rao spoke bitterly as soon as Gowda was out of sight!

"These guys who were members of the Justice Party supporting the British are now Congress legislators!"

Jagannatha who knew that such talk would invariably turn into pro-Brahmin and anti-Shudra politics and thus lose all meaning, chose not to respond. He had noticed that Rao's mind, disgusted by current dirty politics was subtly taking on a casteist tone. He felt that his plan was the right thing to renew men like Rao, and walked along enthusiastically.

When they climbed the hill and reached Jagannatha's house, dinner was ready, and they were hungry. As usual, there were about twenty people for dinner. For a few of them, coming to the market place was routine, and the others had come to visit the temple. Chikki felt very happy that Jagannatha had brought Sripathi Rao to dinner.

She said, "Rayare, it is a month since we saw you..." and handed him a towel.

THREE

Exhausted, Jagannatha stretched himself on the bed and dimmed the lantern. Just to stretch so made him supremely happy. He had earlier, after lunch, tried to tell Sripathi Rao of his decision, but Rao's

distracted look had silenced him. That evening, as usual, the untouchables had come. Did any one of those ten young men understand what he had told them? He felt incapable of gauging their thoughts. They used to stand outside in the front yard, and it had taken him a whole week just to get them to approach the verandah. Perhaps they would never agree to climb the steps and sit on the mat. When he was a boy, if Pilla's father Bharma ran into him, the latter would step aside, and, hiding behind a tree, pull off his black shirt, return bare-chested to the edge of the street and bow to Jagannatha apologetically as if his mere presence before a Brahmin was a cardinal sin. Only after Jagannatha was out of sight would Bharma put his shirt back on. No! It was not enough that these young men accepted his stand solely because he was their master. No! Coercion was defeat. Besides, to have any meaning, his action needed their whole-hearted backing. Jagannatha got up, had dinner and sat at his desk, pen in hand.

First, he should write to the newspapers about his purpose. Let Sripathi Rao read of his decision in the papers. Let him not impose it on Rao. Sripathi Rao might not have the courage to alienate himself from the town's folk. Besides, he might not feel free to disagree if Jagannatha faced him personally with the news of his plan. Jagannatha should do what was possible for him, and if others wished to join, they were welcome. Jagannatha decided to write the letter. He wrote three drafts and tore them up. When he tried to verbalize his thoughts and feelings, it sounded like a romantic ideal and he seemed to be a naive man in a world of make-believe. *People in this town believe that if untouchables were to enter the temple of Lord Manjunatha, Bhootharaya the demon god of the lower castes, would hang them by their feet and make them cough blood. Unless this faith in the power of God, shared even by the President of the country is destroyed, Indians will never take responsibility for their own lives. Only the pain of lost faith will make them creative. Lord Manjunatha of the upper castes has made Bhootharaya, the Lord of the lower castes work against his own...* Jagannatha felt this sounded all wrong and tore it up.

He started another draft: *This Manjunatha temple is the supreme enemy of the scientific outlook. It is Bhootharaya who exorcises the female demon, Jakani, from possessed women. It is Bhootharaya who ensures the*

prompt payment of tenancy rent by the farmers to the landlord. And the one who reigns supreme over Bhootharaya is Lord Manjunatha. Unless we demolish our faith in the miraculous power of these gods who have kept us from becoming creative and participating in our own history, nothing, absolutely nothing, is possible. True, to try and destroy this 'divine' hold is like putting one's hand into a bee-hive but it is Lord Manjunatha who has made meaningful social action impossible. Inertia and inaction have drained our social life of meaning. By denying this reality, we live in a world of self-deception. Therefore, for a grand revolution to occur here, the lowest of the lowly, the untouchables will have to stand up, their heads erect. The only authentic thing here is the step they take. That one step can change the reality that has persisted for centuries. It does not matter how high the upper castes go, we will still be stuck in an illusion of progress and not... Jagannatha tore up this draft as well. It sounded pedantic. I should write only of action. Words made him sound ingenuous and foolish. After all, he had decided to act in order to lose all his falsity and gain authenticity. He should not now build verbal castles. Having determined this, Jagannatha wrote a short letter focusing entirely on his proposed action.

Sir, I have decided to take some untouchables into the Manjunatha temple. I think the Old Moon Festival[1] *is the best time for this, because on that day, devotees from all over India will be here. If we can prove that those untouchables who enter this temple will not vomit blood and die, I believe that it would be the start of a new natural thought pattern. I appeal to all progressive people to support me. (Sd) Jagannatha, Bharathipura.* He wrote two letters, one in English and the other in Kannada, sealed them in two envelopes, and addressed them to two newspapers. Then in the chill of the night he left home to mail them. It pleased him to go down the hill to the post office and mail the letters, even though he needed a torchlight to find his way. He walked back joyously, danced up the stairs to his bedroom and fell on his bed. Even in the bitter cold of the night, he was on fire, perspiring profusely.

Jagannatha could not sleep. His mind was far too stimulated to rest. Outside lay the thick curtain of darkness. He turned up

[1] the first day of the first quarter on which the moon is invisible.

the lantern light and continued his unfinished letter to Margaret. *Then I thought that we all live in the womb of God and we will not begin to live unless we act and make our existence in society meaningful.* His sentence sounded pompous and he struck it off. If he wanted to speak the truth, he should say, *Dear Margaret, I have failed you also because I am not yet a man. When I act with the help of untouchables, I will become a man. . .* No! Even that sentence was not real. *I have not yet recovered from the disease of acute self-analysis. To speak symbolically, dear Margaret, I have hitherto been amusing myself standing before mirrors. I cannot be real to myself without mirrors. When I worked for my Bachelor's Degree in Mysore, Nehru's idealism was my mirror. My speech patterns, gestures, demeanour were all tricks that I used to make myself attractive. My obsession with self-exploration constantly created images of me between mirrors. My height, long smooth hair, wide wistful eyes, my crowd rousing words, my apparent ability to lose myself in something. . . all worked, and I became progressively more false, hollower and softer.*

Not being able to write all this in his letter to Margaret, Jagannatha stepped out of the room and began to pace the terrace. A huge house on the hill, wealth, rank and respect. Sturdy and tall, he had grown up standing before these magnifying glasses. In the eyes of others, he was not an unfulfilled man. *But Margaret dear, you don't know the fraud in me. Getting swollen by self-inquiry, I feel a sad paralysis at the moment of action. When it came to me in a flash that I would do almost anything at such a moment to please, I lose my peace of mind. Dear Margaret, I have never engaged in action that would lead to exertion, that would exercise me, melt my fat, ignite it and burn it up. Margaret!*

Right now, what I truly feel is fear. Fear that the people of Bharathipura would read my letter and treat me like a dog. The enthusiasm I felt writing the letter has vanished. I seem to be losing all my options and means. Jagannatha found not doing anything equally unbearable. He decided to probe the very roots of his mind and sat down before the unfinished letter to Margaret. Outside the window, beyond the hills, the moon was just a line, the buzz and whir of glow worms. And so cold!

What had he done for five years in England? He was agreeable to both blacks and whites, employing subtle frauds. He managed to live in a style that prompted his professor to say, "The most

charming and honest young man I have met in years." He became a magnetic existentialist, who argued that personal living was the only real thing. His black eyes, olive complexion, his tone of voice... he used all these with superb sleight-of-hand. He turned liberal, a reader of *The Guardian*. Reason—simple. Liberal rhetoric helped him to justify his aimless drifting ways. He favoured free love because he wanted several women without commitment. So, he became a vociferous opponent of puritanical attitudes and applauded the French faith in the joy of living. He wanted to be free, and so dubbed life itself absurd. He became a hero to young men caught up in various stages of seducing their women. An Indian friend, smarting at his cold rejection by a white girl lustily cheered his raids on Western culture. Similarly, an Englishman trapped in middle class respectability admired his anti-bourgeois stand. He assumed a variety of personalities so as to conceal his innermost appetites. Bluntly speaking, his life was one continuous debauchery. A masquerade.

Jagannatha remembered the day he had first met Margaret. Chandrashekar was with him at the London University Union Pub. Disgusted by middle-class life in India, Chandrashekar had come to London to work as a substitute teacher in slum schools and to study in evening colleges. Overcome by loneliness, he spent his time drinking draft beer in pubs till closing time. In Bangalore, a strict Brahmin, in London, a militant socialist.

The day he met Margaret, Jagannatha was at the pub feeling depressed because, walking out of the library, he had suddenly discovered that he had nothing original to say about E. M. Forster. He was struggling to give some shape to his dissertation on this novelist. Chandrashekar, angered by the indifference of his co-workers, lectured on how great Indian genius was, how unteachable the slum children of London were and how colonialism had diminished the Indian mind. Jagannatha, who was in no mood to hear Chandrashekar's harangue, got up, bought another half-pint of beer, some cheese and onion-flavoured crisps and came back. He sat down and lit his pipe. Chandrashekar's speech continued unabated. Quite suddenly Jagannatha felt that he would never be original, he would forever be a counterfeit. His words came from others. His thinking was imitative. He had not found a single new thing to say about

E. M. Forster. In speech, well-chosen appealing words of revolution; in manner, a gentle expression of humility before all; in thought, a pig; in behaviour, a cat in search of a snug place to nestle... thus soaring higher and higher, but becoming more and more hollow within... Jagannatha felt nauseated. He muttered to himself: hell, I am like an eel. Words dressed in thought were all false. The only truth was that half-expressed desires filled his mind. Born rich, he had no sense of direction, he had no need for it. All this talk about rebellion and revolution, all this clever discussion of literature, this whole assortment of mirrors, only to confirm that he existed. There was no real conviction. The truth about him was his constant search for an audience who could certify the truth of his words to him, his reality.

As Jagannatha sat feeling nauseated with himself Margaret walked straight over to him. Holding her beer, and saying "May I join you?" she sat next to Jagannatha. Some of her dark hair spread over her cheeks. Her full figure probably reflected her lust for life. She stood up and took off her jacket and threw it on a chair. Around her neck was a thick necklace of beads. She was wearing a light blue dress. Pushing back her unruly hair from her face, she smiled, and offering her hand said, "I am Margaret." Just as Jagannatha was about to introduce himself, she added, "I have seen you. Your speech on what it is like to be an Indian in Great Britain at the Students' Union was very sincere and moving."

Jagannatha had talked about how dishonest an Indian in England, living between blacks and whites, tended to be. And also about the psychology involved in an Indian's transformation from a caste-bound conservative in India into a flaming rebel in England. He had explained why Nehru was western in thought while remaining Indian in emotion. As usual, his eloquent style in speech interwoven with sweeping gestures had created the illusion that thought itself was glorious action. His subterfuge had worked neatly. His words were chosen with care so that it became an oblique way by which to analyze his own subtle dishonesty. He had attempted an honest probing of his own contradictions, and this ironically had added to his reputation. Margaret's admiration was clear proof of that. Jagannatha noticed her modish clothes long hair and independent spirit. He concluded that she was not easily impressed. Her admiration for him therefore was

something special and Jagannatha felt grateful and glad. Even if he were to trace his ancestry to Nehru and Byron in a self-deprecatory way, he would perhaps become even more attractive in her critical esteem. He introduced Chandrashekar to her. Margaret told them she was a teacher and was working for a Master's degree in history during her spare time. And then, suddenly, she exclaimed, "I am so thirsty" and drank up her beer, wiping her mouth with her bare hand afterwards. Jagannatha's mind and body grew alert by what her personality and demeanour conveyed to him: she was eager for his attention and she was free. He got up with the three empty glasses. Margaret followed him and said, "I am earning. Let me pay." Jagannatha refused and went to the bar. As he brought the beer back to the table, Margaret told him, "At least let me help." She bought cigarettes. Jagannatha lit one of her cigarettes and started a lively conversation. He noticed how, like a hunter, he was trying to occupy a new girl's mind and make himself real to her.

Just a few minutes ago, he had felt sad. But now, his craning neck, probing eyes, intense talk, his matching facial expression were all desperately trying to root themselves in Margaret's mind. Agreement, difference, self-examination were all weapons in the hunt. Pushing her hair back from the face, she stretched her limbs, exposing her uninhibited mind and body to Jagannatha's attention, Margaret trusted him one minute and doubted him the next. Jagannatha responded hungrily, and the two played and probed in lively conversation. Chandrashekar, overcome by envy, asserted ferociously that European liberalism was impotent and deceitful, and that when a Che Guevara got involved in action here, European liberal sham would be exposed. He argued that discussing the ultimate nothingness of human life and one's own inadequacies was a game played by decadents. The two of them sat there cozily and discussed the human condition in lively conversation. Did they think life was possible in Lumumba's Africa? Was there an option for Che Guevara in the jungle? If the common man were to stand up to be counted, one's dream world would be demolished. Perhaps Chandrashekar was too drunk or too envious to notice that Jagannatha and Margaret too were saying the same thing. Margaret then said that her father was an Indian from Gujarat, her mother was English and she liked her father

better. She told Chandrashekar that she agreed with him. Chandrashekar responded with a sneer. It was easy to say that in a pub. If Jagannatha continued to talk this way, he would be made an ambassador by the Nehru government. Orators climbed fast in India. That was the secret of Nehru's and Krishna Menon's success. A minute earlier Jagannatha too had said the same thing. They left only after the pub closed. Chandrashekar bade them goodbye and left. He had tried to make amends for his earlier rudeness as he left. Margaret shook hands with him and said that she admired his anger. Jagannatha felt envious of Chandrashekar. His sarcasm and jealousy were signs of the life-force in him. He thought that the female in Margaret had been spurred by Chandrashekar's bitterness and the impotence of his jealousy. He said as soon as his friend left —

"He's just a big talker. I know what he's doing. He exchanges his pounds in the black market to construct a two-storeyed house in Jayanagar, Bangalore."

Chandrashekar had been reduced to nothing in Margaret's eyes. Instantly Jagannatha felt ashamed at the way he had tried to score. Contrite, he had added, "Chandrashekar comes from an impoverished background, I don't think I can understand his compulsions."

Perhaps he had tried to rise in her estimation with these words. "I know the type," Margaret said.

The two walked to Margaret's apartment in Bloomsbury. Margaret asked him in saying, "I'll fix something for you to eat. Come." Opening the door, she had added that her landlady was a suspicious sort. She had advised him to be quiet and held his hand as he went up. She asked him to relax, pointed to the sofa-cum-bed and helped him take off his coat. She placed Ravishankar's sitar recording on the player and went in saying. "I won't be a minute."

Jagannatha examined her bedsitter curiously. Most of the things she had used to decorate the room were blue in colour. On her table, a photograph of the naked Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa[1] — hands folded and sagging breasts. On the wall a painting by Gauguin. In the corner an old radiogram. On the table were

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[1] a great mystic visionary from Bengal, India.

unwashed plates and some journals. A combination of good taste and lethargy. Pop paintings said that she had good taste but was not a bourgeois. There were also photographs that depicted the horrors of the Vietnam war. Her duffel coat hung on the rack next to the door. The sofa was simple and soft. Jagannatha sat near the gas heater warming his hands. Margaret, still in the kitchen, shouted that he could have some whisky. Jagannatha poured some from the bottle on the bookcase and asked her if she wanted one too. She refused. He went into the kitchen and took some ice from the refrigerator. Margaret was frying sausages. He asked her not to bother. She asked him to wait a few moments.

He said, "Do you like Paramahamsa?"

She said, "Yes. Have you read Isherwood? I like him."

He said, "He is like Forster, isn't he?" She said, "Yes. Paramahamsa and Whitman accept everything. They negate nothing. Their personalities can encompass all the contradictions and complexities."

He said, "They are grab-bags, hold-alls. Their characters are like some Indian dishes. Anything goes."

Smiling, with bread, cheese and sausage in her hands, she walked towards the dining table, and said, "I don't agree."

They ate and sipped their coffee. He helped her wash the dishes though Margaret had wanted to put it off till the next day. Margaret said abruptly, "My mother has castrated my father, I hate her." As Jagannatha was ready to leave, she told him, "Tomorrow is Sunday, we can meet my father. He lives here." Jagannatha returned to his flat elated. He felt that of all the girls he had loved, Margaret was the most genuine. When he was with her, his personality seemed to gain substance and vitality.

The next day was Sunday—rainy, slushy and cold. Jagannatha took a bus to where Margaret lived. Margaret had just finished her bath and her room was warm and cosy. Jagannatha sat in front of a gas stove. Coffee or tea, she wanted to know. Jagannatha offered to help and followed her into the kitchen. He felt gratified that Margaret had tidied up her room for his visit. He stood close to her as she poured boiling water into the teapot. The scent of her freshly shampooed hair was pleasant. He said, "Your hair is

already long enough to plait," and held it aloft. She was wearing a loose skirt with peacocks on its border and a blouse. He stood so close to her that their bodies touched. He put his hand on her shoulder and talked about the thesis he was struggling to write. While he sipped tea, he told her about his mother and Bharathipura, his home town and how Sripathi Rao got him to read Shaw and Ingersol. "Who is Ingersol?" Margaret was curious. She was totally relaxed. They drank a whole bottle of wine and chatted. She had made chicken curry and rice. He told her that he really liked vegetarian food and described how he had undergone the baptismal Brahmin thread ceremony.

After food, they went to Finsbury to meet Margaret's father. Doctor Desai, who resembled his daughter and spoke to Jagannatha in Hindi. The latter told him that he did not understand Hindi. Desai's face was rather heavy with a chiselled nose and dull eyes. Rubbing his bald head, he asked Jagannatha about India. He had seen Bangalore, he said. Jagannatha noticed that Desai's accent was thicker than his own. He wanted to know whether Desai got to speak his native language, Gujarati, in England. Desai simply said "Yes" and fell silent. Margaret wheeled out a tea trolley from the kitchen, accompanied by her mother. Her mother was a blue-eyed blonde, stern of speech. Her lined face made her look older than Desai. She complained of the "dirty habits" of the five Indian students she had as paying guests on a bed-and-breakfast arrangement. She labelled India a God-ridden country. Mother and daughter argued over this. The father said nothing. Jagannatha realized that it was Mrs. Desai's indirect way of expressing her discontent about her husband, and so, he said nothing. Margaret contended that the British were responsible for India's poverty. Her mother maintained that but for the British, Indians would not have had even the present level of scientific thinking. She went on and on in her disjointed, illogical way about how Indians would cook Indian curry in English homes and spread the smell of spices all over and how they always had their curtains drawn. She left the room abruptly, saying she had work to do. Margaret followed her into the kitchen perhaps to retaliate bitterly. Desai stood up, sighed and said, "I am a very unhappy man. You may ask my daughter and she will tell you."

Jagannatha felt embarrassed by the way Desai sought his sympathy. Desai paced about the room muttering. "Go back to India. Don't stay here long. When I am outside my field, who am I? Who recognizes me here as a doctor? Perhaps they think that I am an Indian bus conductor."

As Margaret came out, the anger in her eyes seemed ready to burst into tears. She started to walk out, taking Jagannatha with her, holding his hand and shouting, "Wretched country, wretched people!" she said. Jagannatha wanted to embrace and console her right there. They said not a word till they returned to her flat by bus. It was evening. Tears gushed forth from her eyes. She rested her head on his chest and sobbed.

Jagannatha asked her whether he could spend the night there and she nodded assent.

Margaret made love to him that night with the utmost intensity and concentration. He received all that she had to offer — her unhappy childhood, her wants, her eagerness, the excitement hidden in the crevices of her body. He looked at his watch as he caressed her warm naked body that rested in his arms. It was two a.m. Margaret got up early in the morning, made tea and woke him up. She asked him to step out of the building without being seen by her landlady. He lifted Margaret in her dressing gown with both his hands and kissed her. He whirled her around. She smiled like a naughty girl and said: "It's getting late for my school, you had better leave."

Jagannatha took root in Margaret's inner being and blossomed. She said she did not believe in marriage when he proposed to her. "See what my mother has done to my father. Stripped him of dignity completely," she said. Jagannatha was not too keen on marriage either but fear of losing her had made him talk of it.

He had vaguely decided to go back to Bharathipura to become authentic as a human being. But he could not live with Margaret in Bharathipura. He would have to shift to Bangalore and become an absentee landlord. Giving parties, talking radicalism in English somewhere in the cantonment area, spending his life with similar rootless people, his Indianness linked to Ravishankar's sitar, Konarak sculpture and folk music. At parties Lucknowi style shirts, silk sarees; in the living room, decorative

brass pedestal lamps without wicks, a sculpted Nataraja[1], the Lord of Dance, figures of Kathakali[2] dancers, cute little parties, saree-clad women with shaven underarms and bobbed hair — probably nieces of Indian Administrative Service officers or prospective brides waiting for commissioned military officers to propose to them. "You don't want it? Please do have some. Why? Are you dieting?" etc. — the customary party queries.

Margaret was not one of them, not that type. However, if she came to India, she would have no choice but to be one of them. But yet, he had tried to persuade her to marry him because the state of being in love was about to lose its original intensity.

Gradually, their love lost its initial single mindedness. As she lay in his arms, Margaret would lose her self in some remote lethargy. Or he would accuse her of lethargy, pointing out the unwashed dishes and clothes that were strewn around. She would ask him — shockingly — why he tried so hard to please everyone. And he would feel very hurt whenever she said that. He would get terribly irritated, especially when she spoke admiringly of Chandrashekar whose behaviour he felt was utterly spiteful and cruel. He however discovered that she was using Chandrashekar this way to intensify his sexual passion. That was when he began to treat Chandrashekar nicely and praise him. Margaret was incensed.

"Aren't you ashamed? Are you a man? You take every kind of abuse from Chandrashekar!"

Jagannatha was enraged that her body was getting limp and languid in serving him. He had become just a sexual instrument that brought her gratification and sleep; she was exploiting his sexual prowess in every way she could. His interest in her body that opened up and yielded so easily, waned. He found her half-asleep routine caresses a nuisance and would push her hand away. Margaret began to treat Jagannatha's impulses, dilemmas and intensities with total indifference.

One sunny Sunday morning, Margaret was lying on a carpet under an apple tree in her backyard. She had smeared olive oil all over her and wore only underwear. Jagannatha, wearing trousers

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[1] another name for Lord Shiva, the King of Dance.

[2] a vigorous form of dance-drama from Kerala, a South Indian state.

and shirt, sat in an easy chair. Margaret lay face down to sunbathe her back. She said, "Jagan, please unhook my brassiere."

Jagannatha got up and did what she wanted and sat back and thought of something else. The summer sunshine was pleasant. Sunday silence. Suddenly, Margaret, face down, said with no note of cruelty, "Look, Jagan, Chandrashekar's spite seems more authentic to me than your nobility. One can't really feel your presence, feel that you are there. Your anguish over your incompleteness appears to be playacting, but Chander suffers more. You see, his cruelty. . . he becomes real by that. . . even his meanness. . . But you are not enough of a man."

Apple tree. Sunshine. Green grass. Margaret's back with a white strip where her bra had covered her skin. She spoke without any feeling. She did not see Jagannatha's face at all. He lit a cigarette. He had never felt such anguish as he did at that point of time. He sat, stared at the grass, then stared at the shining hook of her bra. As he sat so, staring, he suddenly felt like ending his life. But Margaret did not lift her head. She lay there with the sun shining on her. Hair spread out, and bare back, her limbs at ease. She was nonchalant. He sat next to her, with his hands pressed to the ground, not wanting her to see him in this state. After a long time, she lifted her head and saw him. Did his eyes gleam with tears? His lips, mouth and throat were dry. She got up and hugged him without saying a word. She rolled over with him. He did not say he liked it, nor did he say he did not. She moistened his lips with kisses, but his body had gone dry. She unbuttoned his shirt, kissed him on his neck, on his chest. His eyes were wide open. Kissing him the whole time, she forced him to close his eyes. Words were dead. He stayed that way, nothing of him involved in the sun, the grass and the woman's body, without wanting anything, without rejecting anything.

Next day, he went to his professor and said, "I have no more than ten pages to say about E. M. Forster. An article of mine is appearing in *Essays in Criticism*, that's enough for me. I don't want a degree."

His professor asked him to sit down and said, "You have no reason to think so at all. You are one of my brightest students."

Jagannatha said "Thanks" and got out. Within a week, he was packed and headed back to Bharathipura. It was two o'clock and silence lay outside. Jagannatha tore up the letter he was writing to Margaret. He would write to her after he became more substantial. And for him to become that, the untouchables, who lived like birds and animals, should muster enough courage to take that first step into the Manjunatha temple. Their rebellion would bring him authenticity. He should struggle with their mind-set. Also fight Manjunatha. The self in him would achieve a definite shape through their revolt. The fat would melt. He would write to Margaret after thus making his creativity possible. He turned off the light and lay down, a shawl over himself. He laughed at the memory of Bhootharaya's talisman hidden under the small bed. He felt cold and covered himself with a woollen blanket. He could not sleep. Later however he slept badly and had a horrible nightmare. Bhagyamma, Sripathi Rao's wife, her hair dishevelled was holding Bhootharaya's singara, a bunch of areca flowers. And she was beating her son, Ranganna. Ranganna lay writhing; Sripathi Rao, sat drained of colour, dazed; Bhagyamma's thrashing continued unabated. Ranganna fell unconscious. Bhagyamma was still beating the now unconscious body as if she were pounding rice. Ranganna's nose and mouth bled. Bhagyamma was trying to lift Ranganna as if he were a piece of wet cloth wrung out. Ranganna's neck broke. Suddenly, Bhagyamma screamed at Sripathi Rao. "You, you are responsible for all this." And then, Bhagyamma broke down crying, shocked to find the singara in her hand.

Jagannatha woke up with a start, drenched in perspiration.

Four

It was about six months since Jagannatha returned to Bharathipura from England. They had sent a small car to fetch him from Shimoga. Driver Budan was disappointed that Jagannatha had not brought a new car from England. He was however happy to receive him and to load the car with Jagannatha's luggage. He told Jagannatha all the

news. After his mother's death, Chikki hardly left the house, the car was rarely used. There was a festoon made of mango leaves to greet Jagannatha at the entrance to Bharathipura. He felt upset by all the people who waited to receive him ceremonially at the town's entrance — Seetharamaiah, the chief priest; Prabhu, the town's richest merchant; Gurappa Gowda, the legislator from the area; Vishwanatha Shastri, Jagannatha's shanbhog[1]; high school students wearing khakhi shorts and white shirts; the headmaster with baggy pants and vermilion-covered forehead and Sripathi Rao. Jagannatha was searching for that very man, Sripathi Rao, who was lost in the rear of the crowd somewhere, when sanctified red rice fell on his head, and his forehead was smeared with vermilion. Mantras blessing Jagannatha poured from Seetharamaiah's mouth. It must have been Seetharamaiah himself who placed Bhootharaya's symbol, a singara bouquet, of areca flowers in his hand. Before Jagannatha could recover from this onslaught of Lord Manjunatha, Gurappa Gowda gave him a lemon and garlanded him[2]. Folding his hands in prayer, Gowda also lectured on the good fortune of the town, thanks to the blessings of Lord Manjunatha. Jagannatha was alarmed at the possibility of his ego bloating like a raw chickpea in water in a place where his prestige was secure and pre-determined. He therefore thought vaguely of first rejecting Lord Manjunatha, which meant hurting these people where they were vulnerable. He would use their faith in him in order to engage them in his plan, even as sanctified red rice began to be thrown abruptly on his head.

Sripathi Rao, holding the end of his dhoti in hand, chewing betal leaves, arecanut and tobacco, stood smiling in the background. Jagannatha knew what this smile in his eyes meant. It seemed to say, "As you are the chief trustee of the temple, swallow your atheism and live the way I am living, conceding to each, his or her faith." Sripathi Rao spat out the tobacco juice and came to him with open arms, embraced him and patted him. He spoke casually along with Gurappa Gowda about Jagannatha's journey, exhaustion etc. Jagannatha had been afraid that as he aged and

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[1] overseer
[2] a gesture of welcome.

weakened, he would become liberal and accept compromises to make his life tolerable; that he too would face this fate someday. He wondered whether, beyond this defeat reflected in the benign smile of Sripathi Rao, there was any fire of urgency left. He, who found himself reflected in every eye, had worried over how the Indian environment softened up the individual. He now saw how it had converted the bushy-browed Sripathi Rao, — he who had undertaken a hunger strike, all by himself in front of the Taluk Office in 1942, and who, earlier had set fire to his clothing store in response to Gandhi's call to boycott foreign fabrics — into this figure of smiling impotence.

After getting rid of everyone, Jagannatha had come home with Sripathi Rao. Chikki, being a widow, had not shown her face at the welcoming ceremony. Now, some girls from the neighourhood sprinkled holy water before Jagannatha crossed the threshold of the house. He went into the living room and started to converse with Sripathi Rao. He knew that Chikki was waiting for him to pray to their household deity and drink the cold milk she had kept ready for him. The sacred black stone of Lord Narasimha, it was said, had been worshipped in his family for a thousand years. The shanbhog, wearing a huge vermilion mark on his forehead, went in and out of the house, with his cap tucked under his arm. But no one dared to ask Jagannatha to pray. When Jagannatha called out, "Chikki," she came into the room with some cold milk for him. He looked at her with affection. There was no need for words. But if she were to ask him to pray to their family deity he would have to say, "Pardon me. I am afraid that if I become a believer, I shall turn into a total insider, losing my identity. I cannot become involved in this town's affairs without first becoming a stranger to the world of Lord Manjunatha. Chikki, I have come here to involve myself in things to authenticate myself, to become solid." But he however did not have to say anything now. He just drank the milk, and looked at Chikki with love. She resembled his mother, but had less hair, a smaller forehead. The way she spoke with her face held slightly to one side was exactly like his mother. She was wearing a white saree and white blouse. After she became a child widow, she had given whatever assets she had to Jagannatha's family and had grown up there. She had actually raised Jagannatha and had a

personality of her own. In fact, to outsiders, all Bharathipurians looked like members of Lord Manjunatha's clan. However if one looked carefully, each one was distinct... if that was so, how was it that Manjunatha ruled over them with an iron hand? Their anonymity? Or... Jagannatha found it difficult to think further.

Rao began to discuss politics with fervour and delight. For him, politics was like a spicy, crisp Indian snack. "Do you know how Gurappa Gowda won the election? Remember, he used to be a member of the Justice Party that was pro-British! However, he joined the Congress in 1947. When it was election time, he went from house to house, carrying Manjunatha's vermilion, a symbol of His blessing, and got everyone to swear on it that he or she would vote for him. After all, many of them are from his Gowda caste. Besides ...."

Jagannatha was weary after the journey. He stood up to go for a bath and felt like telling Rao, "Give up this cheap politics. Don't talk of elections. Let's instead think of action that will bring about a fundamental change." But, he just said, "Rao, let's bathe and ...."

Rao had already finished his bath. Chikki told him, "You must stay for dinner." Rao started again about electoral politics. He went on about how he would lose in the municipal election again as he did before and why. Jagannatha felt worried by these diminished men who had once followed Gandhi and his vision. However, he concluded that it was not fair to judge men like Rao in terms of the Marxism that flourished in the cosy pubs of England, and went into the bathroom. For someone used to a bathtub to now blind himself with soapsuds all over the face, fumble for the mug and then pour water generously over his body, from head to foot, brought immense joy. This shining brass mug, some oily substance made from the Matthi tree kept in a bowl, the home-made soapnut powder (made specially out of the pods of a shrub) and sandalwood soap — all reminded Jagannatha of his boyhood. He took so much time bathing that when he stepped out, he could not check the perspiration that drenched his body despite repeated towelling. He then ate with Rao and told him that Prabhu who was a substitute for him as the chief trustee should continue so. Chikki who could hear him in the

kitchen said, "How could that be?" Rao looked at Jagannatha with a meaningful smile.

The day after his arrival, Jagannatha tried to establish a new relationship with Bharathipura. But, he knew by the way the gathering at the high school auditorium had nodded and expressed their admiration for him, that his talk about Russell's ideas had been futile. Especially, Nagaraja Shastri's praise of his erudition had shaken Jagannatha. "Is any of this new to us? Hasn't it all come and gone in our ancient concept of materialism?"

Which path should he, Jagannatha, take to become real in such a context? How could this town be made creative? What method should he choose? Jagannatha thought hard and long. The first priority was to know exactly how these people lived. On his way from Shimoga this question haunted him. Born a rich Brahmin, he hardly knew anything about the very soil here. He could identify a few fruit-bearing trees, name a few birds, remember a few by-lanes to the villages of his tenant farmers — that was it. He knew very little else. As he was their landlord, people made way for him, looking at the ground in his presence, ostensibly out of respect for him, pretending it was an error to even be within his sight, but he was real to no one. The minute he turned his back, their faces changed. Jagannatha knew that these very low castes, who appeared before him with such servility, were capable of scouting the surrounding forests and hills by smell and touch alone, even if they were blindfolded. Should he learn to hunt, drink native liquor, chew tobacco and be crafty? But then, there might never be an end to such a conversion!

He was past the age when he could believe that to behave nobly would make him attractive and that to pursue ideals was the right thing. He was past thirty, and he was not real to himself even now, Jagannatha thought again and again. He realized that thought alone would never bring an answer to this question because to think was like sinking into a bottomless pit while life around shaped itself, indifferent to him, and in silence. Loans for marriage, loans for farming, loans for medicine — that was the life of the people here. Only in his anxiety was he connected to them. His real self would never surface because of the aura that surrounded his status and the protection given to him by Lord Manjunatha and his liege, Bhootharaya.

Bhootharaya possessing someone, with a bunch of areca flowers, thundering and shaking and shrieking, "Is dharma[1] being adhered to properly here?" The chief trustee was expected to answer him, "Yes, yes, it is." One by one, in a queue, the lowly devotees, hands pressed together in salute appeared before Bhootharaya with their appeals.

"All right, put down five rupees. Take your blessing put down ten, take yours ...."

In such matters of divine judgement or dispensation, people like Jagannatha were the protected few. Prabhu was now the chief trustee in place of Jagannatha who had resigned courageously in protest on the occasion of the President's visit. Jagannatha knew that unless he broke out of the social fabric of privileges and obligations, he would not have a clearcut identity. Lord Manjunatha was amorphous and he too was amorphous in their midst. Was Bhootharaya at least real?

He remembered the free exchanges in pubs with long-haired friends while he was in England: life had no purpose and so, no meaning. Man was free only in his mind. No socio-political change would ever alter the existential reality of the human condition, etc. All these ideas appeared to be jokes in this pit of Manjunatha, called Bharathipura. Time had come to a standstill here, the big bell booming the same way every day. From birth to death, life moved here according to a pre-ordained pattern.

What did it mean to understand people? To become entangled in their lives? Because of his wealth and status, there was one fixed relationship between him and these people. It began to dawn on him then that it was perhaps impossible to effect even a minor change here, however much he tried. He began to wear a white shirt and dhoti and people started admiring the simplicity of this rich man. And went even further and commented that Jagannatha's shanbhog looked wealthier than his master. How could he implant the appropriate image of himself in their minds? He felt he might even commit suicide if he failed utterly. Get up in the morning, check the ledger, lend money, eat lunch, discuss the price of arecanut, arrange for new plantings — what a meaningless existence! He was afraid that he was becoming weaker

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[1] duty and righteousness.

within, and hollower. He was afraid he would become even weaker and hollower. A smiling impotent, no man's enemy, eminently respectable — manure for Lord Manjunatha's glory. The ugly and hateful aspects of his way of life seemed to be distilled in the manner in which he tolerated shanbhog Vishwanath Shastri's reverential and protective attitude towards him.

Shastri had succeeded scrivener Krishnaiah as the house accountant and become a bandicoot, first under the management of Jagannatha's mother, and later, that of Chikki. He lived where Krishnaiah used to. The north of Jagannatha's house was in Shastri's language, "The Estate Office." Adjacent to that was the accountant's house. Six little children, Shastri's wife and her widowed mother, that was Shastri's family. Because Krishnaiah's wife died before he did, Jagannatha according to his mother's wish, had taken over the education of his only son, Gopal. But, Krishnaiah's power, house, cushioned chair, table covered by a black oil cloth etc., had automatically become Shastri's.

Jagannatha was reminded of a slimy lizard sticking to a wall whenever he encountered Shastri. A cat-eyed, fair-skinned man. While everyone else put a small vermilion mark between their eyebrows, Shastri wore a huge one covering a large part of his forehead. It was so big — Jagannatha had once made fun of him in front of Rao — that it seem to gather all of Manjunatha's glory and flaunt it to catch everyone's eye. And as the fame of Manjunatha's vermilion-blessing ranged from the forehead of the president's wife to that of a vegetable vendor in Bangalore, Shastri's huge mark set him apart as a Bharathipurian even on Mahatma Gandhi Road in Bangalore. Besides, ever since he had replaced scrivener Krishnaiah, Shastri never ventured out without this mark, the dhoti taken in between his legs and tucked in at the back, shirt tucked in, a tie, a gaberdine coat and a black cap. And he sported a gold-laced turban whenever he went to Shimoga.

The only time Jagannatha had seen Shastri without his cap and tie was when Shastri was trying to seduce the wife of a servant, Venkatappa, brandishing a five rupee note in front of her. With one foot on a mudwall, looking around to make sure that they were alone, jumping over before one could say, "Here" and

grabbing her coquettish body — this was how and when he had seen Shastri, tieless and capless.

Shastri was a smooth talker. Jagannatha had never seen him at a loss for appropriate, time-serving words. Nobody could conclude for sure whether he said yes or no or what he meant from the formal, cunning and refined words that foamed from his mouth. The full experience of his word magic that enabled him now to tighten, now to loosen, now to turn into a cat, and then, the next minute, into a troubled mouse, to refrain even as his audience thought he was yielding, was known only to those who approached him to borrow money.

Jagannatha could not stand Shastri's face without its vermilion mark on the eleventh day of every moon cycle, the day of fasting and penance. His bald forehead looked desolate and forlorn. Perhaps because the presence or absence of kumkumam on his forehead determined the impact he made on the mood of the people, his nickname, Vermilion Shastri sounded most appropriate.

Shastri had built a fort of buttery words around Jagannatha so well that the latter was almost helpless. When Jagannatha came back from England, the only means of contact with the people he had was his wealth. But Shastri had created a system that allowed no one to by-pass him to reach Jagannatha. The loud voice he used to flatter in public had weakened Jagannatha. Jagannatha's self-loathing increased as he noticed how Shastri, like himself, wanted everyone to love him. He felt even more disgusted that Shastri knew he had this weakness and exploited it to strengthen himself. He felt frightened by the way Shastri, a different version of his own distorted self, used the spell of words to create a comforting image of himself in others' eyes. He began to sense that if he could hurt this soft, slimy creature, he would be taking his first step to overcome his own weakness.

Jagannatha did not know why or how his glimpse of Shastri with Venkatappa's wife had made him feel that the shanbog was not invincible after all. The sight of Shastri grabbing the attractive but unwilling woman had utterly disgusted him and made him feel that Shastri was grabbing him, Jagannatha, with words, in the same way. He had gone straight to Shastri's office and waited there for him. Shastri came, vermilion on his forehead, smiling as

always and lit the gas lamp. No tie, but the cap was on. Jagannatha said, "Shastri, I want to ask you something. Bring the account book. I want to see which of the tenants owes money this time."

Jagannatha had suspected that Shastri's ledger keeping was dishonest. If he could catch him, Shastri would back off and stop "grabbing" him. Jagannatha spoke severely. Shastri replied, shaking his head, "My, you poor soul, why do you want to ruin your eyes reading that book at night? I will read it out to you tomorrow. You don't have to bother with these things, really."

Jagannatha was stern. "No! I want to see for myself how much we make and how much we spend. Get me that book. I'll take it to my room."

Shastri did not show how snubbed he felt and gave Jagannatha an account book. His gesture and manner — dusting the book, blowing off the remains of dirt, handing it over delicately — suggested that he felt sorry that a nobleman like Jagannatha should get upset over a small thing. Jagannatha suddenly felt somewhat insecure, and that made him angry. He felt scared by the possibility that he might not be able to nail Shastri for cheating after all. He recovered somewhat when he remembered the seduction incident he had witnessed at the farm.

Next morning, he summoned Shastri and said, "What is this, Mr. Shastri? About thirty tenants have yet to pay for the areca crop. We should see them and talk it over. Tell, Budan — we will both drive out there."

Shastri did not seem ready to back off, "Sir, we can send for them. Why do we have to go to their door? Even they would feel embarrassed if the landlord himself visited them on a small matter."

"It's all right, Shastri, let's go."

"No, no, Rayare, let me go tomorrow. I have some work today. I have asked Janardhana Shetty to bring some people to spray the crops."

"Shastri, let's not put it off. Let's go now." Jagannatha then asked a servant to instruct Budan to bring the car. The sudden pallor on Shastri's face gave him courage. Some strength seemed to surge up within him.

Shastri shut the door before speaking. Eyes closed he pleaded, "Please, please protect me, spare me. I am a man with children.

There has been some error in book-keeping. There are no defaulting tenants. Some did pay somewhat late. I have not yet entered it in the book. That's all. If you want, you may call for the ledger from the store. Check whether all the areca crop owed to you has been handed over to you."

It seemed that Shastri had not yet been beaten. Jagannatha spoke bluntly, "Shastri, your salary is two hundred and fifty rupees a month, isn't it? It is too low. From today, it will be four hundred a month. You surrender all the areca you have taken. Stop cheating. Please, stop talking as if you are drawing a strand of hair through butter. Leave immediately and do what I have told you."

Jagannatha was pleased to see Shastri standing speechless for the very first time. He concluded that Shastri would be frothing with hate inside. He felt victorious and repeated, "Go." Shastri left mechanically. Jagannatha's face did not express the remorse he felt on seeing Shastri depart defeated, cap tucked under his arm.

After this incident, Jagannatha felt he had secured a foothold. His vague desire to unite with the people became stronger. He rose early every day and went to the workplace wrapping a short white dhoti around himself. He tried to understand what his servants thought, what dreams they had, what made them feel pain or pleasure. He was convinced that these people who seemed to be so servile in his presence did not really respect him. When he tried to talk to them intimately, they were suspicious of his motives. When he joined them in their labour, they thought he was greedy and wanted to check whether they were cheating on their jobs. When he tried to be generous, they thought he was an inexperienced, raw young man. Jagannatha simply did not know what to do.

Jagannatha had suspected that bananas, pepper and arecanut were regularly being stolen from the farm. So one night, he stayed back at the farm without telling any one, which very act gave him intense pleasure. However, he soon grew worried that no thieves would show up that night. Still, he waited like an obsessed lover to discover the thief or thieves. About

midnight, hearing footsteps, he felt a tingle of excitement. He spotted two people even in the intense darkness. One was an old man and the other a youngster. Jagannatha held his breath, waiting. They came close to him. That two thieves, unaware of his presence, were close enough to be seen by him created a sense of immense power in him. The sight of the old man cutting off banana and areca branches and giving them to the youngster satisfied a profound need in Jagannatha. When the old man climbed down, Jagannatha held his breath as if he were doing the climbing himself and hoped that the old man would not fall. He waited anxiously for things to unfold further. He prayed that the branches the old man felled would not wake the watchman. When the youngster had gathered everything, the two of them left with the bags on their heads. When they had gone some distance, Jagannatha wanted to find out who they were. He followed them quietly, learning for the first time the existence of this secret path from the farm to the hill. He wondered about all the possible secret ways known to the lower castes. He followed the two thieves, like a cat, up to the top of the hill. When they were just about to hit the top, he ran and caught hold of the old man's hand and turned on the torch-light.

The old man turned out to be Seenappa who used to behave like a thoroughly likable man in his presence. This sturdy forty-five year old and his son Gangappa had returned to steal. That strengthened Jagannatha further. He asked Seenappa, (who immediately prostrated at his feet pleading for mercy) to get up. He checked Gangappa, the youngster who was about to run, and said in a quiet voice, "Don't you ever steal again. That's all. I will let you go this time." In his words, was a note of warmth for being on the same level with the farmhand.

"I will make amends before Bhootharaya. Please let me go!" Seenappa's words made Jagannatha see that the old man had found it difficult to believe him. From now on, Jagannatha thought, he would be a real man in the old man's consciousness. So, he said happily, "Take a bunch of bananas. Take the rest to my house. If you need any money, just ask me and I'll give it to you."

He started towards home. Meanwhile, the trembling Seenappa said, "Let me walk you to your house, master!" Seenappa accompanied Jagannatha right to the door, promising to find other thieves. Jagannatha listened to everything Seenappa said without any response to indicate that it was his cunning that had made Seenappa more real than his humility.

Jagannatha noticed how his status went up among his labourers as soon as the news of his detective work spread. Now, ironically, he found himself in another confusion about how fear alone made farmwork possible. Would the desire to increase his wealth come to occupy his whole life? He was afraid that wealth alone would enable him to utilise all his strengths. As long as wealth remained between him and the others, a truly whole human relationship between them was impossible, but, at the same time, having no wealth at all would mean no relationship whatsover. Even to share his assets equally would not solve his problem. That was because, in Bharatipura, relationships were based solely on wealth. One had to be either the ruler or the ruled, or a merchant, or an agent of Lord Manjunatha. Or else, one had to renounce everything and become an ascetic. Barring the last possibility, in all the others, relationships were established on the basis of wealth. If one were a landlord, one would necessarily lose one's humanity, or if one happened to be a tenant farmer, one would have to live the life of a half-dead man. Or one became a merchant and cheated. At the root of every connection was money. The protector of this system was Bhootharaya, a henchman of Lord Manjunatha. Jagannatha decided to probe deeper into this predicament, feeling that, as things stood, there was no escape from this labyrinth.

What was the inner life of these people like? Jagannatha longed to know these facts. Seenappa, apparently decent, was a thief. Even after being caught, he did not suffer any inner weakening. There were secret passages here known only to the nocturnal lower castes, the Shudras. Even they, who were afraid of Bhootharaya, found undetected ways, going beyond established means — these had given a new turn to Jagannatha's thought process. He felt that these people, who appeared to be so servile and humble on the surface, had an indestructible desire to live, deep

down, and he wanted to fathom it. In a secret world, inaccessible to Manjunatha, Bhootharaya, landlord, merchant, ascetic or mystic, these people acquired that will to live without any conscious effort. Jagannatha learned that to talk idealistically about the "common people," without taking into account, the cunning structures of their inner world (which transcended the established social mores) was to be hollow.

There was a young foreman of the labour force, a dandy named Janardhana Shetty. He would do no manual work as if to prove that he was the boss, and wore his watch on his right wrist. Khaki trousers, a shiny terylene shirt, cigarettes and matchbox in his pocket, neatly cut hair, the stylishness with which he described the city of Bombay, the competition he encouraged among women workers for his favour — through these attributes, he had earned the reputation of being an efficient foreman. However, though he tried very hard to look like a city man by his dress, embellishments, mode of speech, the indelible tattoo on his forehead betrayed him to be a real villager from the South Kanara region[1].

One day, Jagannatha wished to speak to this young man who was about his own age. He asked Shetty, then supervising his labourers' work, to come to him. Shetty, hearing his master's voice, threw away his cigarette and came over. Jagannatha asked him to sit by him.

"No sir, it's all right." Shetty would not sit. Jagannatha did not know how to break down the wall between them. He said simply, "Please, do sit down. It's okay." Shetty still chose to stand. Jagannatha asked "How many children does Seenappa have?"

Jagannatha soon realized that Shetty probably knew that he had caught Seenappa red-handed, stealing, and might therefore be feeling embarrassed and fearful about one of his own men being a thief. He tried to change the topic, but before he could, Shetty said, "Please use the familiar singular in addressing me, not the respectful plural."

"What have you studied?"

"Sir, I finished middle school."

Jagannatha fell silent, not knowing how to continue this dialogue. Shetty himself spoke hesitantly, "I have warned Seenappa.

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[1] a district in the south of Karnataka.

Sir, you asked me about his children. He has three daughters and three sons. The eldest daughter works here. She has left her husband. The second one is Kaveri, she is the one who carries the greens to the farm every day. The third one too is working here. Leaving aside Gangappa, the other two sons are very young. Poor man! Too big a family. But for you, he would have lost his job."

Jagannatha's curiosity must have been a problem for Shetty. That Shetty was drawn to him because he had misconstrued Jagannatha's purpose in wishing to know about Seenappa's family, upset Jagannatha. He waited eagerly for Shetty to feel free to speak. Shetty began to describe the details of Seenappa's married life in a gossipy manner.

"Forget this Seenappa. One of his brothers, it seems, desired his own daughter-in-law and threw her out when she refused to yield. To speak the truth, even that daughter-in-law was no angel, she was the type of girl who spread her legs to all comers."

Jagannatha tried to show that he was neither embarrassed nor shocked, saying, "Well, there are many such people!"

Shetty's enthusiasm grew, "Sir, if you ask me about Seenappa, you wouldn't believe what I have to say. This man has intimate relations with his eldest daughter. Otherwise, why would he separate her from her husband?"

Shetty lit a cigarette after divulging all this, "Why don't you smoke, Sir?" In order to show that he was still not perturbed by Shetty's disclosures. Jagannatha, meaning to ask something, asked something else altogether.

"The second daughter, Kaveri, why hasn't Seenappa tried to marry her off?"

Shetty replied, smiling, "Seenappa is excessively greedy as well. He says he won't give his daughter in marriage unless he is paid a bride price—five hundred rupees. A working daughter, attractive. So, that bastard has turned arrogant. That's all."

Shetty, growing familiar with this kind of talk said "All in all, Sir, people have no morals. As they say, only distant hills appear smooth. When you see these illiterate people at close quarters, you find that they have no scruples at all. They keep their own daughters and daughters-in-law as mistresses. No thought of honouring any marital code. It doesn't matter whose wife a woman is, they go for her."

Shetty must have come to know of Shastri's humiliation. Jagannatha did not know how news travelled in Bharathipura. Possibly a servant standing outside, had heard him chastising Shastri. Shetty said in a chatty intimate tone, "Sir, you really gave it to Shastri. He had it coming to him. You should have seen how high he was flying before you returned. He is no ordinary one, believe me. That wife of his is so merely in name. The whole town says that he has sexual relations with his own mother-in-law. The eldest son, it seems, was born to *her*. Her daughter, poor woman, suffers silently. What else can she do?"

Jagannatha, having listened patiently to Shetty's sordid tales came home, his head in a whirl. If one took a look at the private lives of human beings, one saw how each life was conceived and allowed to survive in Lord Manjunatha's womb! How many secret by-ways and detours there were for people to bring their lives to fruition!

Because of his intimacy with Shetty, Jagannatha had a new dilemma to face. The day after his conversation with him, he found Kaveri, not the regular maid, Thimmi, sweeping his room. A well-built girl, she had worn a short saree that left her bare thighs on display. She had roses in her hair. She swept the floor under the bed coquettishly. When she worked on the farm with other girls, she had needlessly and provocatively rearranged her saree flap (covering her breasts), in full view of Jagannatha.

Jagannatha wanted her, but did not know how to approach such a girl whereas he knew what to do with a girl of his own class. He knew that with Kaveri, nothing beyond a temporary sexual union was possible. That meant they would be nothing more than sexual objects to each other. The fact that his body and its arousal were beyond his control, revealed to him the tragedy of the class system. Despite this awareness, his body warmed with desire and frightened him whenever Kaveri came in to clean his room.

One day, when Kaveri came in, Jagannatha was shaving, seated in front of the mirror. There was a ten rupee note on a suitcase behind him. He could see it in the mirror. He watched as Kaveri, who was sweeping the floor feverishly, came near the note, halted for a few seconds and swept the same area twice. He lathered his face, lost in his curiosity to find out what Kaveri would do next. Kaveri bent down for the third time and looked towards the

mirror. Did she guess, from seeing his face in the mirror, that she had his secret consent and that he wanted to see her become corrupt? Really, she must know that he could see everything. She must have seen that though his hand was busy lathering his face, his eyes were totally absorbed in looking at her hands. She took the note and tucked it into her saree folds with great ease. While she was hiding the note, she let her saree flap slip off her shoulders and exposed her breasts. She came towards him with the flap still down and breasts on display. Under the pretext of sweeping the floor under his chair, she pressed her left breast against his thigh. Then, under the pretext of cleaning the window against which he had his mirror, she stood behind him and bent down, closing the space between their bodies. Her firm, well-grown breasts pressed against his neck.

Jagannatha sat, doing nothing. The knowledge that this present moment, which could open up in full bloom, would become a void in the future, made him impotent. There was a gulf between them that even the explosion of sex could not cover. He wanted to say to Kaveri, "Please, pardon me!" But he could not. He simply sat there perspiring. He felt defeated and detached just as he had when he was with Margaret under the apple tree. He felt he was unreal. Kaveri had walked out in her normal seductive way. Jagannatha recovered, stood up, walked directly into the bathroom and washed his face. From the next day onwards, Jagannatha left his room when Kaveri came in to clean it. He tried to stay away from Shetty who was eager to talk to him. Venturing to understand human beings meant getting entangled in their tortured relationships. When one tried to grasp them up close and concretely, one saw all kinds of unpleasant things, as one would, while examining the skin under a microscope, but he failed to understand the essential little things that a mere first look could hold. Political action that seemed possible and indispensable when one saw people from a distance would turn out to be impossible or meaningless at close quarters, and this made an activist feel too perplexed to do anything. A man who slept with his own daughter or daughter-in-law, a wife-beating husband, this vulnerability, this smallness, this wrath, this tale of daily pain and pleasure. When one saw all this vividly, one felt that historical changes were all superficial

events and that nothing ever changed the depths of the human self. What difference did it make whether one did or did not do something, if human pain and pleasure remained the same forever and the whirling of day and night continued to be the same? Why should Jagannatha think he could better the lives of girls like Kaveri through change? After all, Kaveri had left him worried and depressed after having aroused him.

Jagannatha, feeling lost, thought of all this for days. His zest for farmwork diminished. He felt alarmed that his curiosity about the inner lives of others was leading him to unforeseen places. This sense of alarm was intensified by the thought that he was going back to his earlier bored, disillusioned existence and its corresponding conclusion that life on the whole was meaningless and all that one could do was to become clearly aware of this meaninglessness. He determined that if he, as an insider, did not engage in action that could alter fundamentally the current reality, it did not matter whether he lived or died.

One evening, Jagannatha was sitting on a rock behind the temple. The president had come and gone. Suddenly, the bells for evening worship rang. An idea struck him that very minute. Untouchables should be taken into the temple! The reality of centuries should be changed with a single step of an untouchable. Manjunatha should be broken. People should be subjected to the painful process of becoming responsible for their own lives.

He got up and sped home. He gathered about ten young untouchables, men he had selected and began to talk to them.

From that day on, shadows presented themselves every evening at some distance. They would come close and say, "Master." Jagannatha would say "Come." They would reach the edge of the yard and stand there. Jagannatha would tell them, "Think, decide and act responsibly." But words had not yet become real. Jagannatha would ponder over this endlessly. How could he make words real? What could he do to make them accept, render the words real and turn them into action? How should he break out of Manjunatha's womb? How could he make *them* burst out of Manjunatha's womb?

Five

As usual, Jagannatha got up early next morning and walked out of the back of the house and away from it. The house was on the top of a hill; there was another hill behind this one—on which lay his cashew farm. He knew that about half his cashew crop was being pilfered.

It gave Jagannatha a thrill to go to the top of the cashew hill and look at Bharathipura from there. Dark green jackfruit trees, mango trees blossoming at this time of year, areca trees swaying in the valleys, and tiled houses in their midst. Bharathipura, neither a village nor a city. To the east, the river meandered like a snake, next to it the dome of Lord Manjunatha's temple, visible from any elevated spot, weathered from ages of sun and rain, a resting place for birds. Right next to the temple, Bhootharaya's hill. Women who had not reached menopause were forbidden to climb this hill to visit Bhootharaya.

The festival of the New Moon[1] was about a month away. Jagannatha decided that he and the untouchables should be ready by then. There would be pilgrims from all over the country. In a couple of days, his letter would appear in the newspapers. He should therefore inform Sripathi Rao of his resolve that very day.

Jagannatha paced about the hill. He was wearing a black sweater that Margaret had bought for him. The mist that had covered the entire town of Bharathipura was disappearing in the morning sunlight. The town appeared beautiful from atop the cashew hill. Gleaming tiled houses, the river like mirrors where the sun touched it, dew drops on tiny spider webs woven over the green grass covering the hill, meeting the sun's rays at an angle, shining like diamonds. Only when one came downhill and walked the streets, one saw the town's emaciated people whose only sign of growth was the paunch produced by Lord

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[1] the first day of the first quarter on which the moon is invisible.

Manjunatha's free meals. Fat street dogs that refused to budge even when buses came down. Monkeys perched on fig trees, snatched bananas from pilgrims' hands with impunity. These and the urine-smelling streets were entirely different.

Jagannatha, coming down the hill, saw the first bus of the Manjunatha Bus Service, owned by Prabhu, leave for Shimoga. He ran downhill. Warm from the exercise, he bathed and entered the dining room. He found about twenty diners only, some of whom were known to him. The rest were strangers. Pilgrims who came to Bharathipura were from all kinds of places. The poor among them either came to his house or went to the free lodging house built by Jagannatha's forefathers. As for the rich, they were grabbed by the town's Brahmins who made sure that they were booked right at, or near, the bus station as paying guests.

Jagannatha set off after eating uppuma[1] and drinking coffee, determined to tell Sripathi Rao about his plan. He wanted to be able to say, "You have become weak. Through my planned step, you may feel renewed. The town may breathe again. We will all die and be reborn by the first step the untouchables take into Lord Manjunatha's temple. Otherwise, we will continue to sink in Manjunatha's abyss. Rayare, don't you think that this town has been rotting for centuries? I may not be able to prove in an argument that Manjunatha is solely responsible for all this. Only our actions will determine it for us. Society here has become purposeless because no action has been possible except eating, mating and dying. Put your hand to the wheel of history. Let's turn it on the very day of the Chariot Festival!"

Jagannatha felt that he had begun talking to himself too often. He might be able to stop it if he could talk effectively to the untouchables. He walked down the road, mechanically saluting the passers-by. He sped past the town hall where he spotted Nagaraja Jois. He went straight to Sripathi Rao's house on Chariot Street.

There was a vegetable shop at the corner of Chariot Street, which meant that you could get coloured cucumber, pumpkin, sweet gourd, coconut and tiny gourd; a variety of small bananas,

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[1] a spicy dish made out of semolina.

black and green were also sold here. Ever since his return, Jagannatha had been thinking that nobody had ever bothered to find out whether anything else could be grown in this soil. The minute the price of arecanut went up, even rice fields were converted into areca farms. They were using up the essence of the soil to grow their arecanut. On one side was Manjunatha, and on the other, arecanut — a soil where nothing other than these two grew. To his surprise, Jagannatha found a cauliflower withering away in the vegetable shop. He asked the owner Byari, "Where was this cauliflower grown?" Byari, who was wearing a colored dhoti, got up in honour of Jagannatha, spat a mix of betel leaves and tobacco juice, dismantled the turban from his head, spread it across his shoulders, and stood perplexed. He seemed not even to know whether he should offer Jagannatha a seat. Jagannatha sat down, and asked again:

"How did this cauliflower come to Bharathipura?."

"Sir, once in a while, I get it from Shimoga. Except for Puranik and his people, nobody eats this."

A big smile blossomed on Jagannatha's face. He simply said, "Fine," and walked ahead.

There was a sign board, "Sri Manjunatha Prasanna, Brahmin Youth Association" above Byari's vegetable shop. Some time after his return, Jagannatha became curious and found out what this organization did. The unemployed children of the fairly well to-do gathered there, and after breakfast, played cards the entire day. There was a carrom board but no one ever used it. There were about twenty-five novels whose cover pages were in tatters. That was all. These books were in a box made of nutmeg wood. On top of the box was the carrom board. A mat of palm fronds was on the unswept floor at the center of the room. On it sat the young card-players. As usual, a crowned picture of Manjunatha on the wall. Bharatamata[1], her hair spread over the Himalayan mountain range, occupying a map of India. Gandhi spinning on the charka.

Even though the gutters reeked, the women sprinkled cow dung water on the street morning and evening and drew figures of rangoli. Reason — occasionally, Manjunatha Swami made his

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[1] Mother India.

appearance in a palanquin. Some houses had clusters of bananas and paddy stalks, an attempt at beautification. As the festival of the New Moon approached, some verandahs had been scrubbed clean, with rangoli drawings in the front yard and whitewashed walls. Here and there, one saw a picture of Kennedy, healthy and smiling, with Nehru by him, on the wall of a room adjacent to the verandah, where most likely, the eldest son of the family slept. These homes probably had educated children. However, by the Kennedy picture hung a calendar featuring actress Madhubala[1] or a half-clad model. Jagannatha saw some old men on the front bench of a fragrant shop that offered Ayurveda medicine[2]. Shyama Pandit, the Ayurveda doctor, got up and saluted Jagannatha. Suddenly into Jagannatha's view, floated an advertisement about limiting the birth of children to two per couple — a boy and a girl. In box-shaped shops where they sold betel leaves and arecanuts twisted into cone-shaped paans, one found rows of birth-control packages. The absurdity of it all was that in Bharathipura there was still no electricity. Broad-faced Jinendra, the only Jain in town, had pile on pile of copper pots and pans, stainless steel plates and cups.

Jagannatha would look for something new on Chariot Street every time he walked along it. This time, what struck his eye in every shop was a picture, printed on art paper, of the nation's President, his head bared, standing with palms pressed together in front of Lord Manjunatha. The price was seventy paise! The temple committee itself had had the poster printed in Bangalore.

Jagannatha took the street that led to the river, and reached Rao's house in a hurry, eager to talk to him. Rao had probably not left for his khadi store in the town square, since it was not yet nine. He stood in the dark central hall of Rao's house and called out, "Rayare!" There was no smoke as cooking had not yet commenced. Someone, not Rao, came out, wiping his mouth. A big middle-aged man with cropped hair. He had a gold-laced wrap around his shoulders and by him stood a girl in a polyester saree and a blouse which left her midriff bare. The girl did not seem to be from Bharathipura. They both left with Ranganna,

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[1] Hindi film actress of the recent past.

[2] an Indian system of medicine.

Rao's son, without even noticing Jagannatha. From the kitchen, Jagannatha heard Bhagyamma shouting.

"If you don't find Udupa, tell Rama Jois that I sent them, he will get everything done — both oblation and worship at the temple." She came out, saw Jagannatha and stood still for a second, as if afraid. She brought him coffee in a copper cup and neither spoke for a minute. Then, it was Bhagyamma who started talking.

"He has gone to Shimoga and will be back tomorrow morning."

Jagannatha, seated on a low stool sipping coffee sweetened with jaggery did not respond. Bhagyamma continued, "He said that it is fine for Savithri to teach for a year at Shimoga. And that he will arrange for her stay at a friend's house. Is it possible for her to eat there and not pay for her food? I asked your friend how much of her pay there would be after all the expenses. He didn't say a word. If I say anything about talking to the District Education Officer, he pounces on me. He himself says that the present Minister for Education was his jail-mate. What does it all matter? Of what use is it? Jaganna, I am tired of dancing to my husband's tune. If your mother were alive, she would have told you. Didn't I burn the four silk sarees my parents gave me when he set fire to his clothing store? Ask anyone. Now, my daughter is sitting at home without an income. We have to eat, survive. How can we? I tell him everyday, get me a buffalo at least and I will manage by selling milk. If we stand on our prestige and self respect, we will starve. But, he never listens to anything. Jaganna, I am tired of living. My good man, you must save us. I have known you ever since you were a child. So, I ask you without shame. The visitors you saw, from Chikkamagalur are friends of my maternal uncle. They are my paying guests. At the most, I may make about ten rupees. I did not send Ranganna to get them. I have not thought of deceiving your friend, my husband, even in my dreams. What can I do now?"

Jagannatha was pained to see Bhagyamma slapping her forehead, trying to enlist his sympathy through her pitiful airs and gestures. Noticing Savithri behind the door, thoroughly embarrassed, making frantic signs to her mother, Jagannatha tried to change the topic.

"Bhagyamma, do you know why I am here? Our office needs a young man to write the accounts. I thought that Ranganna who has finished high school, would be suitable and came to ask you. Send him to work from tomorrow. I will pay two hundred rupees as advance on his salary. I need a reliable young man. Is it all right? It's getting late. Let me go now."

Jagannatha got up. He was too upset to see Bhagyamma's face blooming in gratitude. Deliberately using a business-like tone, he said, "Send him soon. I need him urgently," and walked away. His mind was heavy with the tragedy that lay behind Bhagyamma's emotional tricks, her words drizzling with an intolerable false nicety, interspersed with words of pride and self-pity. He was afraid that Bhagyamma might openly ask him not to tell any of this to Sripathi Rao, and so he left before she could and sighed as soon as he got out.

Suddenly, Jagannatha's mind was in a daze. How dreams dissolved in the business of living! Perhaps things would stay the same no matter what the effort to change them! Perhaps, this land was incapable of flowering. A group of Deevas, with Bhootharaya's prasad, a bunch of areca flowers around their ears, came down the hill and passed him. Only areca flowers here... in the hands, over ears, on heads, on tall trees that sway. On everything! The faces of the tribal Deeva women who had come all cleaned up to visit Bhootharaya looked tranquil. They did not think about Manjunatha as Jagannatha did. Rainfall, drought, a buffalo calving, tenancy money that they still owed — these were their concerns. They talked about these things and forgot everything else. They quarrelled. They pledged things to deities. Feeling that there should be more to their lives than this, he had put his hand to the wheel in a state of anguish and anxiety, wanting them to wake up. Would these dark skinned untouchables who wore human faces over their skulls join him? He was waiting.

Jagannatha swung his arms as he walked, warming up to his idea. After he reached the town square, he took to the alleys and by-lanes, heading towards home. On the way, he passed Nagaraja Jois' house again. Jois spat the juice as usual, and adjusting his shoulder wrap, invited Jagannatha.

"Please come in. Just for a minute." He spread a mat on the verandah, and seating Jagannatha at one end, sat at the other. He placed a plate of betel leaves, arecanuts and chunam between them. He pulled out the garland of beads set in gold from behind his wrap and displayed it. He picked up a betel leaf and while he pruned and peeled it, got ready to talk.

"You spoke of Russell the other day at the high school. I was thinking of it. I think superstitions and temples did not exist during the time of the Vedas. The gist of what I believe is that in the Vedic tradition, in which an individual faced eastward and prayed to the Sun God for intellectual power, temples, worship and rituals had no place. You have after all resigned your trusteeship. You understand what I am saying. I pray to the Sun and ask that the whole of mankind be granted intellectual power. What is this power of intellect? It is scientific knowledge — its the same thing your Russell speaks of."

Jagannatha, engrossed in his own thoughts like a brooding hen, wanted to test his plan on Jois who talked so much, and find out how his intended step would explode in Jois' mind.

He said, "If these superstitions are wrong, people like you and I should do something about them... isn't it action that is needed?"

Jois seemed suddenly to remember something else. "Yesterday, I sent you away without even offering coffee. Nagamani! Nagamani?" The soft sounds of bangles clinking were heard from the central hall.

Jois added, to the lady who entered "Our town's leading landlord is here. We sent him off yesterday unceremoniously without offering anything." He turned to Jagannatha.

"Nagamani, my daughter-in-law. My son, her husband, is a lawyer in Shimoga. The rent is high in Shimoga. And he doesn't earn enough. Besides, here at home, after my wife's death, we had no one to take care of guests and visitors. My younger daughter is only ten, so Nagamani stays here. What can I do? Pilgrims come in search of our house because we are well-known Vedic Brahmins. At times, we have fifteen to twenty pilgrims as guests. I have let my elder son live a non-priestly life. However I want my younger son, Shankar, to be a Vedic priest. In fact, he knows everything: astrology, Vedas, rituals etc. How can we give up

something that has come down as a tradition in our family? When I get Shankar married next season, I will let Nagamani join her husband in Shimoga."

Jagannatha suppressed a yawn. There was no use talking to Jois. To make this sick soil respond, drastic action was necessary. While Jagannatha was thinking, Jois held up a paper to show Jagannatha something. Jagannatha realized that Jois had him sitting on the verandah to advertise the presence of the richest man in town at his house. He was also aware that his own weakness was in his wanting to have a civilized relationship with these people. Only through radical action would his true self rise in their consciousness.

Nagamani bent down to place a banana leaf in front of her father-in-law and Jagannatha. Jagannatha's attention was riveted on the young woman who had bent down before him. It was really hard to imagine a young healthy woman in this house! A blouse of checked material trying to cover her fully grown breasts. Slender waist. A chiselled figure in an ordinary dark saree. Dark brown complexion. She had tightly drawn plaited hair with a parting in the middle. A longish vermilion mark on her forehead. Other than a simple necklace, she had no other ornament. Having placed some crisp fried snacks on the banana leaves which served as plates, she straightened up. As she did, her braless breasts swelled and shook provocatively. But, every posture or gesture of hers showed clearly that she was quite unconscious of how attractive she really was. Her gait, her bending low to serve, standing erect, glances, coming to the door and waiting — everything was an expression of a daily routine, not a manifestation of her beauty, whereas Kaveri manipulated even the simple act of carrying greens on her head to enhance the beauty and play of her thighs. Margaret presented yet another kind of enchantment — she would half close her eyes and draw on her cigarette as she discussed serious things, brush back her profuse hair from her cheeks, and lift her face. As Nagamani stood near the door facing Jagannatha in her relaxed dancer-like posture, one felt that her sole purpose in standing that way was to seek a respite from the chore of blowing air into the smoke-filled fire or from the exertion of drawing water from the well.

Because she was not supposed to sit with men, she was leaning against the door, totally unaware of the glowing seductive power of her body. These women who love only to cook delicious meals for their men! And the untouchables who live only to carry out of town the faeces that these meals turned into! In the midst of these, the male citizens of Bharathipura who sat on their verandahs digesting their food! — Anger stirred in Jagannatha.

He saw Nagamani's face as she stood near the door with a tin of snacks. Soft, tender skin that made her cheeks shine with reflected light. Full lips. Ears that were slightly over-sized. When his eyes searched her big eyes, they found nothing there, nothing more than the expectation of serving him more snacks as soon as he'd finished the present lot. He probed her eyes deeper to gauge the sorrow in the depth of her being. But she stood facing him as if she were watching an emptiness, a void. Nagaraj Jois, who was reading a paper, said abruptly, "Look, someone has written that growing cardamom is bad for the areca crop." Jagannatha nodded and closely observed Nagamani's beauty that made no demands either on herself or on others, devoutly wishing to share her sorrow. But, she stood like a statue. But for her blinking eyes he felt that his distress over her would never reach her inner being. He was suddenly despondent that even his unselfish love would not be able to renew the petrified life-force in her. If women like her did not blossom fully, then his planned action would be fruitless. But then, why had her body bloomed? Why were her limbs so maddeningly beautiful? Jois interjected, "Maybe the scent of cardamom absorbs the essence of this soil's fertility, and thus becomes a threat to areca. What do you think?"

Jagannatha, smiling and casting friendly looks in Nagamani's direction said, "I don't want any more snacks." Jois insisted that he should have some more. Nagamani went in to bring coffee. Jagannatha concluded that it was really impossible to make another's pain one's own, however intensely one tried. Nagamani brought coffee, bent down and placed it on the floor. Jagannatha felt that he would never be anything to her. All that he could do was to dream of her bursting into life when the whole town was resurrected. Nagamani went in. Jois would not let him go. He went on boring him. Again, the same subject — the temple

matter. Idol worship was not proper for a Brahmin who prayed directly to the Sun. He and the current temple priest were of the same family. Jois' grandfather and Seetharamaiah's foster father's father were blood brothers. Seetharamaiah was merely an adopted son. Besides, Jois had records to prove that the adoption had not taken place properly. Therefore, the right to priesthood was his and not Seetharamaiah's. Besides, Seetharamaiah's son Ganesha did not care about purity or pollution. Also he had gone mad once. But his own son was not like that; his son knew all the Vedas by rote. Jois therefore was all set to sue the temple.

Upstairs there was the sound of a ladder falling. Jois' daughter was playing dice with a friend in the central hall. Jois' son came running to report, "They will all eat at the temple today. They will come to our house in the evening. I had them all bathe and pray. I will show them the town and return." He then joined the pilgrims waiting on the street. Jois still would not let Jagannatha go. Placing a hand on his heart and moving closer, he said in a tone of distress, "If you were the chief trustee, we could have settled it somehow. But, alas, that's not the case now. They say that no Bharathipurian should go to the court and that Manjunatha decides everything. Should I believe this and sit about idly? I told my lawyer son to find out about the law that applies to this. Let's go to court. All I ask is whether there should not be worship according to established rules and rituals. Prabhu, the current chief trustee does not listen. He is a Konkani.[1] What does he care? I have drafted a letter to the nation's President. Will you please translate that into English for me?"

Jagannatha said neither yes nor no. He waited to tell Jois bluntly what he thought. But he also knew that he could not plant anything in the slush of Jois' mind. Jois would go on blabbering in the same way. Nagamani would not blossom. Probably no one would. He might indeed become softer still. Slowly, Manjunatha would cloud him too. How come Nagamani did not have the secret ways that Kaveri had? She had looked at him with no feeling whatever. Wasn't she, at least, conscious of being a woman? His staring at her as she served him the snacks had not ignited anything in her. Her big eyes were empty. Her long

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[1] refers to the people and language of South Kanara.

eyelashes simply kept falling and rising. Even when she looked at him, she was not aware of his presence. He was like a pilgrim to her. A hundred pilgrims came, ate, and left in the same manner. They would look at her, she would stand in a dance posture of pause, waiting to serve them, watching their plates, hands, mouths and satisfied eyes. He was just one among the hundreds who had eaten her snacks — that was it. Her fleshed out warm breasts and warm crevices would never stir her. If she were to go to Shimoga and live with her husband, she would stop menstruating, get pregnant, give birth to another life — that was all. To get pregnant and to give birth repeatedly would wrinkle her stomach, her breasts would... that was just about it!

He tried to recall something else. Had someone said something about her to him? He felt upset. He forgot that he was trying to recall something. Jois was still going on and on. His daughter's friend finished playing and left. She was wearing a skirt with a top wrap and went down the steps bouncing. All this joy of living until she got married — that was all.

"The frauds this Seetharamaiah has perpetrated — can you count them in ones and twos? The crown your mother offered to Manjunatha in your name, do you think all the gold donated is on the Lord's head? To think so is madness. Where do you think Seetharamaiah got the gold to get his son a girdle, his wife and daughter necklaces, bangles and earrings?"

The more intimate-sounding Jois became, the closer he came to Jagannatha, and he was now sitting right next to him. He was actually whispering into Jagannatha's ears. Jagannatha stared at his red teeth and red earrings. He felt vexed because it was futile to tell Jois about his plan. "It's getting late, I have to leave." Jagannatha got up to go. And that very moment became etched in his memory: the afternoon, the empty street, the sound of the big bell signalling the final service of the day. When Jagannatha stood flexing his body to shake off his weariness, ready to leave, Jois' daughter screamed, speeding down the staircase.

"Father, father, come quick. Come... sister-in-law..."

Jois ran up. Jagannatha followed. Nagamani was hanging by a rope from the main plank of the roof in the upstairs room that had coloured cucumbers suspended on banana fibers, and sanctified clothes spread out to dry. Close by lay a toppled ladder.

Jagannatha set up the ladder, went up fast and clasping Nagamani's body, shouted: "Give me a knife. Give me..." Jois threw off his shoulder wrap, ran down and brought a knife. Jagannatha cut the rope and gently placed Nagamani on the floor. He unfastened the rope around her neck and asked them to run for a doctor. Jois ran again. Jagannatha touched Nagamani's body. It felt warm. Was it real or was it his fancy? Her neck was broken and blood flowed from her nose and mouth. Her eyeballs had gone up and were stuck. Jagannatha tried everything he knew to revive her breathing. He had Nagamani's body face down and pressed her back. He did mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He rubbed her chest. He closed her disfigured eyes. He asked Jois' daughter for some water and washed Nagamani's face.

The doctor who arrived on a bike, examined Nagamani and pronounced her dead. Jois sat down with his hands on his head. Jagannatha stood up, not knowing what to say to the stunned and silent Jois. The doctor, a young man who had just finished his degree said, "You should inform the police because it is a case of suicide. We should do a post mortem. Sorry, I have to leave." People gathered in Jois' house to be part of the commotion. "Alas! What a wonderful person she was! She did all the work without complaining." Some women said such things and started crying. Jagannatha got hold of Nagamani's husband's address. When asked for her parents' address, he found that she had lost both of them. Someone said that her brother was a cook in some restaurant in Hassan. Jagannatha left, promising to send a wire to Nagamani's husband. He felt nauseated at the people who crowded into Jois' house. Some of them had finished their temple meal and were there, tumblers in hand.

Jagannatha's body began to shake in revulsion every couple of minutes. Trying to wet his parched throat but feeling too sick to swallow his own saliva, he went straight to the post office, sent the wire to Shimoga and sped home. He said he was not going to eat and lay down. He felt like crying but could not. Unable to comprehend anything and sighing, he tossed in bed waiting for the evening.

He saw the untouchables approaching at a distance. Black bodies with only loin cloths around their waists, heads with dishevelled hair, eyes that expected nothing. He went to them and told

them that the day's meeting was off. Chikki must have known that he was agitated over Nagamani's death. She bought a cup of coffee to his room touched Jagannatha's burning forehead and went downstairs. Jagannatha felt grateful to her for leaving him alone and closed his eyes. She knew how Jagannatha ran a fever whenever he was deeply vexed over something.

When he woke up suddenly in the middle of the night, moonlight had flooded his room. Jagannatha felt irritated and shut the window. What sudden thoughts could rise in a mind that had gone blank? Decide, march forward—there was no cause for fear. If action were to become impossible... unable to verbalize his thoughts clearly, Jagannatha stopped thinking altogether. He wearied of trying to fathom Nagamani's mind, and went to sleep.

Six

Jagannatha went up the cashew-hill to clear his clouded mind. Phrases from his planned letter to Margaret came to mind: *In sheer desperation, I am plunging into action. I may regenerate myself in the words that I can say to the untouchables. This town may regenerate as well. When I think of how Nagamani took a decision while I was busy with idle talk on the verandah...*

However, Jagannatha could not fully understand the meaning behind Nagamani's action. Had it made his anguished and committed move in a certain direction pointless and laughable? No, that was not it. But then? She stood. She bent down, served, she climbed the ladder, put a noose around her neck and kicked the ladder. She died. She was burning inside and nobody had known. She extinguished herself and nobody knew. When he thought of that burning woman's decision to put herself out, Jagannatha felt that his planned action was absurd, that his chosen commitment was a farce... *Margaret, you have seen the possibility of my failure, tell me the truth. This Manjunatha is slimy, so are Jois and Shastri; Kaveri and Nagamani screamed—rage or desire? The untouchables might do the same. Sunshine. The proffered back, apple tree, a serene summer Sunday—when you rejected me again yesterday,*

when Nagamani rejected me. . . Jagannatha stopped suddenly. It was a steep climb to the top of the cashew-hill. He felt formless whenever he became sentimental and started looking for words. He then waited like a mother hen hatching an egg, hoping that that which was mucous-like would turn into a beak, feathers, wings and nails. Feeling sick, he would gobble food again and again. Actually, it was when he was gobbling that Nagamani had gone upstairs, kicked the ladder and died. She put out the youth in her that would have broken out as hair in her warm crevices, desiring pleasure. He was thus rejected again, in the afternoon. He would go on becoming slimier in spite of his anguish unless he confronted Manjunatha and converted his dripping words into seeds in the minds of the untouchables.

Jagannatha looked at Bharathipura from the top of the hill. The mist-covered shopping area appeared to be half-dreaming. *Margaret, my anguished helplessness, as I sit on top of this shopping area, waiting for a hatching appears meaningless. I'm telling you everything because you, Margaret, wanted in this mucous-like man nails and beak. Perhaps you too will not blossom. The way you sit, brushing your hair away from your cheeks, as if you are getting ready for some terrifying truth, the way you get thorny like the bilva*[1] *tree in an argument. . . you too will feel someday that all this is false. You too will feel frightened. The sun will reject you too.* Jagannatha came down the hill, washed his face, drank coffee and slept again. But he had to get up and come down because someone was at the door. Ranganna, Sripathi Rao's son was there. Jagannatha gave him two hundred rupees and said: "Give this to your mother. Start work right away." Someone else named Ramakrishnaiah was waiting. A thin man who had eight children to support. The temple authority had taken away his farm when he defaulted on payments. They had raided his house and seized his property. Jagannatha asked him to go to court. Ramakrishnaiah sat silently like a nerveless man. "What can I do?" asked Jagannatha. Ramakrishnaiah pleaded that Jagannatha talk to Prabhu. Wrinkled face, earrings, unkempt hair, husky voice—Jagannatha felt bored. Jagannatha promised to pay the court costs if Ramakrishnaiah took the case to court. Ramakrishnaiah did not respond to that but said, "I'm a man with

[1] a tree, the leaves of which are offered in worship to Shiva.

children. Please don't forsake me." Jagannatha replied angrily. "If you have guts take it to court," Ramakrishnaiah sighed, fearing that he might have to forego his daily free meal at the temple. Perplexed Jagannatha said, "I have no farm to give away. I have some uncultivated land which you may have. I may be able to help in small ways. Come tomorrow or the day after. A letter of mine will appear in the newspapers. Come after reading it." Ramakrishnaiah said yes, saluted him and was ready to go. Jagannatha told him to have a meal before before leaving to which Ramakrishnaiah agreed readily.

Jagannatha went upstairs and wondered why he had told Ramakrishnaiah about the papers. Could he really make Ramakrishnaiah angry? *We live in apathy, Margaret. All our dreams turn into heaps of arecanuts. They get into bags and reach the warehouse. At times, areca crop decays and dreams come to nothing. Ramakrishnaiah craves for a farm of at least old areca trees.*

It seemed impossible to hurt Ramakrishnaiah or make him angry. It was only the untouchables here who never dreamed of areca farms. Jagannatha felt somewhat encouraged that only the untouchables, who did not sow anything for themselves in this soil, but carried dung and shit out of town, were capable of rejecting Manjunatha.

He sat at the table ready to write.

In the afternoon, he ate with the pilgrims, those who had come to buy medicines, Ramakrishnaiah and others. Then he went to his room upstairs. Under the bed there was a fresh bunch of areca flowers, Bhootharaya's talisman and Manjunatha's vermilion in a paper packet. Jagannatha smiled, thinking of the trick Chikki had thought of, having grown alarmed at the sight of Jagannatha teaching the alphabet to the untouchables, using sand to write on. To make Chikki realize that God had no influence on him, he left the prasad and the talismans where he found them. He had not yet told the untouchables about entering the temple. He was teaching them the alphabet while talking to them intimately about sundry things. That was all. They would trace the letters of the alphabet in the sand. Feeling shocked and perplexed, they would follow their master's instructions faithfully. Chikki was

afraid of even this little thing. What would happen when she got to know the full measure of his intention? Jagannatha was apprehensive.

The untouchable youths would come at dusk. Jagannatha found it difficult to remember their names. Who was Pilla? Kariya? Who was Mada? He could not distinguish one from another. He would write words with *cha, ja* and *ta* sounds and ask them to trace them repeatedly. How these young men, who could cut and saw wood with such ease, tripped, when they tried to trace letters! Their muscles appeared to contort with pain while their fingers traced the letters, pronouncing the sounds. The nerves of their necks would swell, cordlike. After the lesson they walked away as if they had sandbags tied to their feet because their legs would go to sleep within minutes of sitting down. Sometimes Jagannatha felt frustrated at the fear in their eyes as they worked on their exercises. He would be terribly ill at ease, especially when some of them, at a distance, watched him in action with awe. He felt as if he were involved in some forbidden ritual of magic or sorcery.

To the untouchables the hour spent thus must have seemed like an aeon. He told himself that the next day, he should gradually talk to them about his purpose. They rose after their lessons as if weighed down by a heavy load. Jagannatha stood there, hoping that something might be born between them. Kaveri with a basket of greens walked past them, shaking her buttocks, glancing sideways and smiling. "Give us some betel leaves, tobacco and arecanuts, master," asked one of the untouchables. Jagannatha gave them all this stuff to chew from his bag. It might be better to give them this before they started their lesson. It might help them to relax . They might cease to be so tense and begin to learn. They might gradually open up to him. He saw Chikki watching the cattle go back to their shed while he crossed the yard after the untouchables had gone home. She looked at him accusingly and called out to the cattle, "Kattu Bai, Kattu Bai!" Shastri was standing outside the office answering Ranganna's questions. Jagannatha guessed that Shastri was not happy having Ranganna at the office.

The servants were lighting the lamps in the house. As he was about to enter he saw Rao approaching and waited. Rao had

come back from Shimoga, gone home and headed straight to Jagannatha's house. As soon as he sat down, he said, "Jaganna, my son Ranganna has no business sense, Why have you hired him?"

"He will learn. And I need a reliable person."

"That's not true. I just had a quarrel with my wife. She must have pestered you."

"Please, leave Ranganna to me. Don't worry. Besides I want to tell you something."

It was dark. Jagannatha took Rao to his room and shut the door. They sat facing each other under the gas light. Rao, sitting crosslegged in a cane chair opened his betel leaf and areca nut bag and asked: "What is it?"

Jagannatha was apprehensive, but blurted it out anyway.

"On the day of the New Moon festival, I plan to take some untouchables into the temple. I have written to the newspapers about it. It may appear tomorrow." he said, throat dry. Rao blanched. Jagannatha was happy to see Rao sit in a daze. His action *must* have some meaning! A man like Rao nonplussed! Rao was groping for appropriate words, trying to hide his dread behind a forced smile. Jagannatha prepared for the ensuing discussion.

"It's no use, Jagannatha. Our Health Minister is an untouchable. So is the District Commissioner of Shimoga. Has it meant or achieved anything?"

Jagannatha was even more blunt.

"Tell me, why are you afraid? Why am I afraid? Tell me!"

"It's not a question of fear, Jagannatha. Their faith is everything to the people here. What right have we to destroy their faith? Can we ask them to forsake their faith in God and put their trust in the Government?"

"Rao, you are a loser. That's why you speak this language of liberals. Unless we destroy the power of Manjunatha, this town will never be creative. Only the untouchables are capable of doing this. How terrified you are!"

Jagannatha wanted to speak even more harshly. Noting the possibility of success in Rao's fear, he felt encouraged to speak out indignantly about all his projects. Rao spoke in a tired voice. "Gandhiji used to say that the mind should be pure with no hate

in it. There should be no self-interest involved in any revolution."

Jagannatha felt that Rao was finding it difficult to face his fear. He said with some remorse, "Rayare, we have no historical sense. You speak like an exhausted man. But, do you know that it was your setting fire to your clothing store years ago that made me commit myself to this action? You too are responsible for what I have become. I might get scared someday and step aside just as you are doing now. But, history uses us without pity!"

Rao, applying chunam to betel leaves, recovered. Jagannatha thought that they were diminishing each other by their bravado.

Rao said, "What these untouchables want is liquor, not God! They are your slaves, and so, they might obey you. You simply torment these people."

Jagannatha did not speak.

Rao continued. "Why do you want to subject yourself to the charge that you are bringing the whole town a bad name? Politics has become dirty. Why do you want to soil your hands? There's no use doing anything in this country. Besides, you are guilty of being born a Brahmin. Sometimes, I feel that only a military dictatorship will mould our people."

Jagannatha asked abruptly, "Have you heard of Nagamani's death?" Before Rao could reply, he went to the window, and turning his back, said, "Rayare, it's not important whether I win or lose. If I can't do something for a fundamental change, I'll have to kill myself. That's all."

Jagannatha felt uneasy fearing that he might have been theatrical in stating his views. He came back to his chair. He was relieved at Rao's serious expression. He was grateful that Rao had legitimised his thoughts by recognising his intensity.

Rao said, "You know that admitting untouchables into several temples has not achieved anything substantial. But I know your intention is different. I understand. However, my fear is that all that will happen is that the untouchables will go in and the news will appear in the papers. And then everything will be as it was before."

Jagannatha grew agitated again. He felt that Rao did not clearly see what was inside him. Rao was not as real in his argument as he was in his fright. Jagannatha sat silently. He wanted to say

to Rao, "You have become slimy, slithery." Rao stood up and spoke.

"You need guts to have ethical strength. A loser like me cannot even be ethical."

Jagannatha was startled by Rao's comment. Again he was hopeful that something might blossom after all. He went down the hill to the road with Rao and returned to spend the night waiting for his letter to appear in the next day's newspapers.

Seven

Jagannatha anxiously scanned the newspaper that the first bus brought. His letter was front-page news. Seeing it made him afraid. But he also felt happy that now there was no going back. He left the paper in the central hall so that Chikki could read it and understand. And then went up the cashew-hill and stood on its peak. He thought that by now, Bharathipurians would have read the paper. His body had become warm under the sweater. A cool breeze was blowing over his warm face. The mist having melted, the town was soaked in sunlight.

The New Moon Festival in fifteen days! He should prepare the untouchables before that, working with total dedication.

As he watched the top of the temple, he remembered: thousands bathed in the river on the New Moon Day. The next day was the Chariot Festival. When he was a boy, he used to get up before sunrise and accompany his mother to the river. As he pranced behind her, people would make way for them in the rush of teeming crowds. He used to stand rotund and naked, shivering in the cold, watching the water. Mother, finishing her dip in the river, her wet hair spread over her back and front, would smilingly ask him, "Come now, and take a dip." Gnashing his teeth and shuddering in the cold, Jagannatha would watch the vapourising water with desire and fear. Mother would say, "Come on, the water is warm," and pull him by the hand. With a smile, she would dip him in the river. Feeling a hair-raising thrill, splashing his feet in the warm water, he would create an

uproarious spray all round his mother. Mother used to find it difficult to get him out of the water once he was in. She would dry his hair well to make sure that he did not catch cold. But water dripped from her thick long hair.

From the river, straight to the temple. The ceremony of circumambulating the peepal tree[1] in front of the temple. He would warm up finishing ten rounds in the time his mother took to finish just three. Monkeys on the peepul tree! Monkeys grinning audaciously, scanning the skins of their young ones for lice. If he mocked them, they would come chasing to snatch the bananas away from him. Walking past the outer wall, plastered with red soil and clay, there was the banyan tree. There used to be a barber named Rama under the tree, who held children's heads between his thighs and cut their hair rebuking them if they moved. As for the grown-ups, he would sit behind them as a mark of respect and trim the hair at the back of the head. The children had to bend over till it hurt. They had to suffer his commands and yield to his active razor by bending down entirely or by slanting the head from one angle to the other. No, he was not there

on the New Moon Day. There would be snake-charmers, either unfolding their cloth bundles or putting on their turbans. Or photographers with photos printed by exposing them to the sunlight. Coloured photos which faded gradually and lost their colour by the next Moon Day festival. Chariot Street filled with shops specially set up. The chariot would be standing ready to go. All round the dome of the chariot, pictures of the Zodiac signs — the ram, the bull, the gemini twins, the crab and so on. In front of the chariot, thick dew soaked ropes lay like pythons. Jagannatha would walk close to the ropes behind his mother, zigzagging carefully to avoid stepping on them.

When he thought about it, Jagannatha discovered that the focal point of all his profound experiences were his mother and Manjunatha. When he was afraid of the bends in the staircase corners, there was Bhootharaya. Mother with her plentiful black hair, her lofty bare forehead, wearing a white saree and blouse.

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[1] a gesture of reverence, the peepal tree being sacred to Hindus.Often a platform is built under it.

Manjunatha wearing a golden crown as if in memory of saving Jagannatha's life, Manjunatha returning to the temple in the evening after having gone round the town, seated in the chariot.

Jagannatha stood leaning against the jackfruit tree, alarmed that his mind was moistening with sentiment resulting in inaction. Unless he gave up his sentimentality, he thought he would not be able to reject Manjunatha. He walked home slowly getting ready to face Chikki who might by now have read the newspaper. He ran into Chikki as he was coming down the staircase, sweaterless on his way to the bathroom her face colourless and corpse-like. She stopped and stood there, her lips trembling, but no words emerged. Jagannatha's heart began to beat faster. She was leaning against a pillar. Jagannatha, staring at her, experienced the same dread, prior to taking a step into the unseen, unknown. It made him somewhat hopeful. That he existed was real. That he functioned was true. He thought that this was the start of the process of elimination of falsities. Chikki did not speak at all, her face contorted as if she were about to cry. Feeling that this was not the time for talk, Jagannatha stepped forward, and then stopped as something else came into his view — the board on the shelf. The board he used to sit on while playing with his mother. Made of heavy wood.

Chikki went upstairs. Jagannatha had a bath, wore a clean white dhoti and shirt and headed for Rao's khadi shop. He felt apprehensive about seeing familiar faces. Kini, the bookstore owner pretended not to have seen him. Jagannatha felt bad. He should now be ready to become an unwanted man. The process of rejecting him had commenced that morning with Chikki. He, who used to feel expansive seeing himself reflected in the mirror of others' eyes, would have to wait like a fallen seed on earth. He should burst open in anguish. He should push the darkness back and sprout in the sunlight. Restaurant owner Krishnappa, who was watching the street, glanced downwards. His withered face, marked by an attack of small pox, looked like a tortoise shell. Faces on the street with sightless eyes. No one greeted him except for the tailor, Shyama, who had borrowed money from him. He was rejected by the whole street, that morning. Some fellow with a black cap, probably an illiterate, saluted him and came to a standstill. He moved only after Jagannatha had passed him.

Houses and shops, their fronts newly white-washed for the coming New Moon Festival. The white-wash acted as a cover for their unbearable backyards. Bharathipura with a smiling face and a rotting rear-end! The untouchables carried faeces in baskets from one back alley to another. They were seldom seen on the street. He had not yet been seen by the untouchables who planted nothing of their own in this soil, but who had nothing but this soil to call their own. He would make himself visible to them and become a new man.

Jagannatha made bold to enter Rao's shop. There was a faded pillow on the mat, and he sat down leaning against it. He looked curiously at Gandhi's photo, his toothless smile, and a rare photo of Nehru in a waistcoat, wearing a dhoti with its hem pulled up and tucked into the waistband at the back. Rao, sitting alone, opening his bag of betel leaves and arecanuts, offered a friendly smile and asked,

"Will you have coffee?"

Jagannatha said "Yes."

Rao stood up and clapped to draw the attention of someone or other at Govindaiah's restaurant opposite his shop. Perhaps no one heard because of the loud Hindi song that was blaring from the battery-operated radio. Besides that, there was the noise of the dosa-maker hitting the frying pan with the ladle to indicate that dosas were ready to be served. Rao, despite Jagannatha's plea not to bother, personally went across to the restaurant, ordered coffee and came back. He said, "Raghav Puranik has sent for me. I don't know why. Will you come?"

"Yes,"

"Have you seen Puranik?"

"I remember visiting his house with my mother, when I was a boy. I hear he doesn't meet anyone these days!"

Rao smiled. Jagannatha, wanting to say something, said, "I have heard his story. It appears he married a widow in 1920."

Rao replied, "I was one of those who went to his wedding. There was an incident on the eve of the ceremony. Some people were travelling in a lorry to attend the wedding. And one of them, sitting in the rear, dozed off, fell out and died. You know what people said? They said that it was to be expected when unholy things like widow remarriage were conducted. The whole

town ostracized Puranik. Puranik changed radically after that. You must see for yourself, how he lives. You won't believe it if I tell you."

Rao felt some inhibition about discussing the day's principal subject. Jagannatha, guessing as much, said, "It is true that if we confront this society, we may end up rootless. I have seen the fate of inter-caste marriages in Bangalore. They live in the Cantonment area, speaking in English, giving parties, admiring Ajanta and Ellora paintings, collecting folklore and educating their children in convent schools."

Jagannatha was surprised to see himself talking non-stop. Wasn't he after all, afraid that what he had just described would happen to him and Margaret, if they were to marry and settle in India? Even as he waited for Rao to get down to the main topic, Venkataraya Prabhu came to the shop and greeted them. Prabhu had been standing in his provision store which was also at the town square when he saw Jagannatha enter the khadi shop. Prabhu was the biggest merchant in town. Barring Jagannatha he was reputed to be the richest man in the region. He had taken over the trusteeship of the temple when Jagannatha resigned.

Prabhu controlled the entire business of Bharathipura. His first son was in business with him. The second was a cloth merchant. The third was the owner of Manjunatha Rice Mills. Manjunatha Lorry Service was in the name of his fourth son — thus, no important business was beyond Prabhu's rule. Prabhu was also the owner of the six buses that plied between Shimoga and Bharathipura under the title, Manjunatha Bus Service. His sons-in-law were placed in various strategic positions. One of them owned a soda factory. Another owned a cycle shop. The third was the proprietor of the biggest hotel in town. They all supplied each other with whatever was needed for business. No brother did anything without consulting the others.

Prabhu's business acumen was well known in Shimoga district. He knew that others knew about how he sold rice, kerosene and sugar in the black market and made money. He had not changed even though there had been a couple of police raids. After Independence, he had started wearing khadi clothes.

Prabhu's policy was simple: one should make money without any regard for law or morality. Social respect would automatically

follow wealth. He said this openly to people, while weighing jaggery on a scale. He was held in great esteem in town because everyone was in debt to him in one or more of his shops, and because he was the catering contractor to the temple. He had even become the President of the Municipality. When Prabhu came to meet him, Jagannatha thought that it was natural for Prabhu to be keenly interested in the power and popularity of Manjunatha as most of his clients were pilgrims of that deity.

Prabhu was a smooth talker. As soon as he came in, he grieved over Nagamani's death. He expressed shock that Nagamani ended her life soon after serving Jagannatha coffee and snacks. He praised Jagannatha's timely help in a crisis. He sat down by Jagannatha on the mat, refusing to sit on a chair. Coffee arrived. Rao asked the waiter for another cup of coffee. Prabhu said, "sugarless" and took out a packet of saccharine. Treating Sripathi Rao as his audience and glancing at Jagannatha occasionally, he started talking.

"Rayare, do you know this? My younger son, Sanjaya, worships you! Loves you! Young people these days are really intelligent, you know. But I don't have to tell you how foul-mouthed *some* people are, and how little tolerance they have. Someone said — let's not mention any names here — that some English girl has poisoned Jagannatha Rao's mind and that's why he is running around with untouchables. Obviously that man doesn't know what Mahatma Gandhi said — well, perhaps he does. The chief cause of all his anger is that he could not get hold of Jagannatha Rao's land in Padubidre. You know what my son Sanjaya said? He's in high school now. He said he would take the public exam this year and go to England just like Jagannatha Rao. Well, Lord Manjunatha willing, why not? What was I saying? Yes... You know what my son said? Aren't untouchables human beings too? Tell me, how can anyone answer such a challenge?"

Prabhu added saccharine to the coffee the waiter brought. He closed his eyes, had a sip or two and said, "I will tell you how times have changed. Sripathi Rao also knows, ask him. The new Deputy Commissioner of Shimoga, Satyaprakash, it appears, is an untouchable. Sreenivas Prabhu, our in-law, the Director of the Areca Society, was saying the other day that the D.C. is very

bright. He has read the Vedas and Upanishads. He will, it seems, put even Nagaraj Jois to shame. He also knows the myths and astrology. Even though he mixes up his 'sa' and 'sha', he speaks very well."

Prabhu suddenly lowered his voice. He leaned towards Sripathi Rao and added in a conspiratorial tone, "Suppose, he comes to our town. And he happens to come to our house. Won't I ask him to come in? Won't I offer him coffee? Can I give him coffee in a coconut shell? Won't I use a silver cup[1]? We have to bow to the changing times. That's why I proudly applauded what my son said."

Jagannatha was surprised and waited. His stomach was about to burst with all that watery payasa[2] of words. Having said so much, was it on the cards that Prabhu could turn around and change direction? He of course did not have any doubts about Prabhu's intention. He wanted to prick Prabhu's balloon.

"Prabhugale, that means you will join me in taking the untouchables into the temple on festival day."

"Oho!" said Prabhu. Jagannatha was lost, but Prabhu did not stop there.

"I told you already, we should bow to the changing times. When the time comes, the right things happen. That's why I told those who were blaming Jagannatha Rao, 'Do you think Jagannatha Rao doesn't know that much? How much have you studied? How much has he? You want to teach him right from wrong? The man who has been to England? What does he have to prove by destroying Manjunatha's glory? The crown that Manjunatha wears is his family's contribution. His forefathers got the big bell for the temple that the whole town can hear. His family built the free choultry. His father, that decent man, never ate before drinking the holy water from the temple. A good man, born into such a family. Do you think, he will act without proper thought?' I gave it to them straight. You may ask anyone. Well, I asked them — Bharathipura's high school is financed by the temple. Fifty percent of the business here is from the pilgrims. But

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[1] irony here, as silver is a metal that cannot be polluted by an untouchable using it.

[2] a dish of milk, vermicelli and sugar, eaten on holy days.

for that, how can hundreds of families feed themselves? What happens to hundreds of people like us who depend on their faith in this God, if there were to be a threat to Manjunatha's reputation? Perhaps our children will go to Shimoga and study. But, if there is to be no temple-run high school here, what happens to the education of poor children? All right, take areca farming. I don't have to tell you how enormously pilferage has increased. If there is no fear of Bhootharaya at all, do you think we will get even a single areca nut? I asked them bluntly whether they think that Jagannatha Rao has not considered all this. You know, I never say one thing to your face and another thing behind your back."

Sripathi Rao was watching the street. He asked the priest's son, Ganesha, going by with a bottle of medicine, "Who is not well?" Ganesha replied, "My aunt." Rao told Ganesha "Send your wife to our house. My wife wants to see her." Ganesha stammered, "Yes." He was standing there watching Jagannatha with great curiosity. Many who had seen Jagannatha talk to Prabhu — those who had come to the provision store, visitors to the temple, cloth buyers — gathered at the khadi shop. Jagannatha surmised that all of them had come to find out about his intended action. The weight on his mind had diminished. Even though he knew it was futile to talk to Prabhu, he said somewhat bitterly.

"Prabhugale, this is the answer to your last question. Our economic system is still medieval. The centre of that system is Manjunatha. It is natural for you to fear any threat to Manjunatha's name because that would be a blow to all your vested interests. But you see, our way of life has become stagnant because of Manjunatha. We are rotting. After destroying Manjunatha, we will have to accept responsibility for our own lives. We will have to find newer ways. We will build a tile factory here. I have heard that this soil might have copper ore. We will mine it. Now, we grow only areca and are otherwise sterile. We will experiment with other crops. If our untouchables were to enter the temple, there will have to be at least a slight change in the mindset of this country that fears Bhootharaya and believes in the power of Manjunatha. A crack today will loosen the entire system tomorrow. We will become free. The important thing in all this is to get our untouchables ready. We should make them take their

first step into history. The first step they take into the temple may alter the reality of centuries. We may all get resurrected through them. Nothing happens without a shock."

Jagannatha spoke, forgetting himself. Sripathi Rao's face seemed to question Jagannatha's waste of breath in talking to Prabhu. The throng at the shop stared at Jagannatha's face, comprehending nothing. Prabhu took some tobacco from Rao, added a little chunam started rubbing it in and said, "No, No, please don't misunderstand me. Don't think I am saying all this out of any self-interest. You know me. I came here from Kundapur with nothing but the weighing scales in my hand. All my earnings, I attribute to Manjunatha's grace, not to anything I have done. Even today, I am content to have just two cups of gruel. So too my children. The only bad habit I have is this tobacco. Right? You know why I am telling you all this? Because, I think what you said is correct. But, to have a tile factory and a copper mine, don't we need electricity? Shouldn't there be a train service between Shimoga and Bharathipura? Don't we need to put concrete surfaces on these damned mud roads? Not only that. Mangalore should become a navigable port. We should have a train service between here and Mangalore. Tell me, am I not right?"

Jagannatha could see that Prabhu was clever. Admiring this cleverness, he looked at Rao. There was a naughty smile on Rao's face. Jagannatha spoke, searching for the right answers to Prabhu's questions.

"Yes, I agree with you. Let's campaign for electrification. Let's fight for train connections. Let's look for all the ways to create fundamental changes in our life. But, it's only when our faith in Manjunatha is hit that we will be able to feel the need to look for new ways. For that, only the untouchables, who have no footing of their own here, can start the revolution."

Prabhu too seemed to be enjoying this dialogue. But, Jagannatha felt distressed that this face-to-face talk was turning into a display of verbal fireworks. However, being a naturally courteous man, Jagannatha tolerated it. Prabhu spat some tobacco juice and said, "Suppose, some were to say, let electricity come first and Manjunatha's influence will diminish automatically.

What would you say? Pardon me, I am saying this for argument's sake, today, we get agitated over things like God, compassion, karma[1] etc., but do people in Bombay and Calcutta worry over such things?"

Prabhu saw his son's lorry parked in front of his store and excused himself for a minute. Having said something in Konkani, he came back; he told Jagannatha who was just about to leave, "I have already told you that I am with you, Jagannatha Rao. Write out an application for electricity for our town. You and I will go to the Vidhana Soudha[2]. Let's take Gurappa Gowda with us. Sripathi Rao too can come with us. Weren't the Chief Minister and Sripathi Rao jailmates? Our Chief Minister will not simply ignore what educated young men like you have to say. Let's get electricity and rail service. The whole nation knows about Bharathipura after the President's visit. The minister will not say 'No.' With progressive young men like you we can transform this town into a beautiful garden. It's getting late for me. We will meet again."

Prabhu left and some followed him. Jagannatha could see what a cunning man Prabhu was. Today, he was the beneficiary of Manjunatha's fame. Tomorrow, he would gain from the electricity he was plotting to get here by using Jagannatha. Prabhu must be thinking already of the tile factory and the copper mine. Jagannatha told Rao, "The real beneficiary of tomorrow's electricity will be Prabhu himself. We may have to campaign against him too."

Rao got up with an understanding smile. He did not lock up the shop. When Jagannatha wanted to know why, he said, "Why should I? There is nothing in the shop to attract burglars," he laughed. On the way, he spoke again,

"Jagannatha, it is true that I am afraid, but I also feel that your leading a few untouchables into the temple is not going to mean much. Don't go by what I say though. May be, my going to jail long ago was really to escape from my wife's nagging. All that I want to say to you is that you should not needlessly alienate

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[1] used by Indians to mean both—one's destiny and prescribed course of action.

[2] the Secretariat in Bangalore which houses the Chief Minister's office and the two houses of legislature.

yourself from the people. I may be wrong, but that I am afraid is a fact."

"I am also scared, but I have no choice." Jagannatha could not think of anything else to say. He was disturbed by Rao's words expressed with such composure. He felt that at this critical moment in his life, he had been abandoned and that he had plunged into a bottomless pit. If Rao had asked whether he had complete faith in his planned step, he would have had to say, "I don't know." But he would also have said that his life would be meaningless without choosing to take on such responsibilities. He felt like asking Rao whether it was not true that social life here was progressively losing its meaning for lack of fundamental action. But he held back because all talk prior to action was just so much babble. He felt nauseated that there were people in Bharathipura who could speak his words with effortless ease. However, he felt joy at being forced to stand without any mirrors to help him.

Eight

If one walked eastward, there was Seebinakere. Beyond that was Tashkentpura, a new extension inaugurated by the Minister for Education. The by lane behind Manjunatha Rice Mills, which eventually hit Tashkentpura, was a short-cut to Raghava Puranik's house. Walking fast, one could reach it in half an hour.

Rao walked with Jagannatha, interrupted frequently by passers-by in whose well being Rao took a genuine interest. Jagannatha realized that the one who had roots in this place was Rao and not himself. Rao asked a farmer who went by, umbrella tucked underarm, "Did you give the application I wrote for you to the Amildar? What did he say?" He was furious at the Amildar for doing nothing. "Why do you have to go again? Nothing gets done without a bribe!" He asked a young man with earrings, "How is your father? Take him to Doctor Anthony's house for a check-up." He told another who removed his footwear and saluted him barefoot right on the road, "Come and see me. I'll

give you a letter for a lawyer in Shimoga. Don't you know that Muslims won't worry about your appeal to Manjunatha?" And he smiled when he said this. Their wives, their children — Rao knew everyone. Their names, birth stars and signs, their secret illnesses, family problems — Rao knew everything. Rao might have come to the conclusion that change, any change was futile because he was deeply involved in the minutiae of daily life.

When he walked the streets in Muslim areas, Jagannatha felt it was another town altogether. Muslims, either tinning brass or rolling tobacco, sitting in front of their houses, wearing printed dhotis, stood up and greeted him, "Salaam, Saab." Chicken in the gutters, eggs in wired baskets hanging in the frontyards of some houses. Rao said with a smile, "Even our Brahmin boys these days eat stolen eggs," and then he asked, "Jaganna, you say you are teaching the alphabet to the untouchables. Have you touched them — at least accidentally?"

Jagannatha said, "No." Rao said, "That's what I say. It's not a question of whether *you* touch them. What's important is whether *they* touch you or want to. It's natural for you to want to touch them. You are educated. Your awareness has been enhanced. After inheriting all the good things of life, this idealism comes to you as a brand new taste. To you, it's a luxury, but, to them?" Jagannatha was delighted that Rao was talking to him really intimately. "Yes, you are right, Rao. The day the untouchables want to touch me will be the day of my triumph. I am trying to make it possible for them to have this explosion in their consciousness. The day they make bold to take this one step. . . ." "Jaganna, it won't happen merely because of your effort." Jagannatha did not respond. Walking on, enthused, Rao said, "Raghava Puranik is the one who first gave me Ingersoll." Jagannatha too felt excited walking in the winter sunlight. His mind cleared. wherever he turned, there were flowering mango trees, coconut trees. A chieftain's wife wearing the fragrant kedage[1] flowers on hair that she must have found in some secret corner of the forest, a beautiful woman with long earrings, necklace, tattooed hands and bare feet, speeding towards the

[1] a variety of the agave plant with scented leaves, used in worship and worn to decorate women's hair; the kēdage grove is usually a snake haunt.

temple.Parijatha[1] and champaka[2] flower trees in the compounds of rich farmers. Jagannatha wondered whether it was not possible for sharp eyes to find something new every day even in the way of life that had been flowing constantly for centuries. There might be a child being born in someone's house. Someone might be dead. A child in the womb of some pregnant woman might be kicking. Here, a full-blown rose on a strong stalk, swung lightly. There, a dog lay on its back, legs in the sunlit air, catching flies. A boy astride a horizontal pole was pretending to drive a car. A worried mother was scolding her son for refusing to eat. Bees swarmed about mango flowers. Beehives hung from the trees that had not yet been felled to make room for areca farming. Animals with eager eyes, sniffed the soil and pranced in distant corners. Sripathi Rao walked silently.

Jagannatha was in search of life's fulfilment through change. He thought he should not forget or neglect the blossoming in daily life. But then, how would action be possible? Women took fruits and coconuts on shining plates to Manjunatha, who wore the crown which they believed had saved Jagannatha's life. Were they the real heirs to the constancy or permanence of daily life or were they merely embryos in the womb of Manjunatha?

"Look, that's Raghava Puranik's house."

Nine

There were so many ways of fulfilling one's life at all levels of society. When the act of rooting, blossoming and fructification happened naturally and constantly in silence, was it merely one's ego to believe in conscious human effort? Jagannatha, bothered by these thoughts, looked at Puranik's house. A compound over ten feet tall, a locked iron gate, a "Beware of Dogs" sign.

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[1] associated with Lord Krishna these small, white flowers have bright orange stalks.

[2] the most famous flowering Indian tree. Its slim yellow-gold petals adorn the heads of gods and women.

Rao said, "Once upon a time, barring your family, the Puraniks were the biggest landlords here. But now, everything is withering away. Puranik's shanbhog will soon be richer than him. Already, he runs a lorry service." He pressed the calling bell and continued, "Wait and you will have a bigger surprise. He has generator. The house has light bulbs." He pointed to the big aerial on top of the house and added with a wink, "Puranik has contacts with every corner of the world."

As the house was set far into the compound, visitors could not be sure that the bell was working. Rao pressed it again and said, "At one time, Puranik was a big revolutionary. He belongs to the time when Sri Aurobindo[1] was making bombs."

After the second ring, a uniformed gurkha[2] brought the keys. Rao said, "This is the first surprise, wait and see." The gurkha saluted them both and took them to a spacious hall; its high ceiling was obviously teak.

In the corner of the hall stood a hat-stand. On it were an evening hat, an ordinary sun hat, a soft fur Kashmiri cap and an assortment of walking sticks. In another corner, there were three rifles on a wooden stand. On the walls around, there were prints of paintings by Western artists tastefully framed. Breughel's *Icarus*, Constable's *Cornfield* with a lustrous sunshiny village, wheat fields, a road with gleaming lights and shades.

Greta Bridge featuring a vivid, pure blue, black and ash colour arrangement; Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girls* with happy smiles; Sir Joshua Reynolds' *The Age of Innocence*—Jagannatha observed with curiosity that the majority of the prints were British. Even the chairs they sat on belonged to Queen Victoria's time, straight-backed and slim-legged. Jagannatha and Rao wrote their names on a slip of paper that the gurkha brought, who then took it upstairs on a carved plate.

Jagannatha looked at Rao, surprised. Inside the hall, in a shiny brass pot, there was a plant that resembled aspidistra. A variety of cacti lined the four walls. Outside, English rose plants probably

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[1] a great visionary and freedom fighter who turned mystic and established an ashram in Pondicherry.

[2] Nepalese soldiers, ex-armymen are frequently employed as guards.

brought from Ooty. Jagannatha said with a mischievous smile, "Lately, I haven't seen aspidistra grown in English homes."

Shortly, the gentle sound of someone coming down the stairs was heard. The steps were probably carpeted Jagannatha thought and waited for the master of the house with great curiosity. "How do you do?" this from a man of about sixty, who walked in briskly, extending his hand in greeting. He shook Rao's hand. He was wearing black trousers, too loose by contemporary standards and a waistcoat. His cheeks were so clean shaven that they shone. He extended his hand to Jagannatha. Though he appeared frail, his handshake was firm.

"Pleased to meet you, I have heard such a lot about you from Sripathi, my only friend in this blessed place. I used to know your mother, a beautiful, cultured lady. She used to play sweetly on the veena[1]... Come in, please come in."

Puranik stood up and pointed to the interior. He urged Jagannatha to go in first, "After you." Jagannatha was reminded of the B.B.C. when he listened to Puranik's artificial English accent.

Just as Jagannatha had imagined, the staircase had a carpet. A wooden staircase with polished brass bannisters. Every landing had prints of paintings by famous artists. The third floor housed Puranik's study. Puranik pushed the door open and said, "Please come in."

Jagannatha entered, and was stunned. Puranik brushed back the thick crop of white hair from his forehead. There were sofas on the Kashmir rug that covered the floor. In a corner, a black-wood writing table, beautifully carved. A cushioned swivel chair in front of it. Books in glass cases faced each other. At the centre of the wall there was a carved fireplace with embers left from the fire lit in the morning. Glass animals, Japanese dolls, a framed cartoon of Churchill chewing his cigar. There was a long-haired poodle under a sofa, sleeping cosily with its eyes closed and neck stretched out. Jagannatha took a look at the books on the shelves; Reynolds' novels, Russell, Bernard Shaw, Kipling, Churchill, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Forster. He pulled out Forster's *Howard's End* and flipped through the pages. There were telltale signs that

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[1] a stringed instrument.

Puranik had read the book. He was drawn to a passage, marked by a red pencil and portions ticked.

. . . Miss Schlegel, the real thing's money, and all the rest is a dream.
You're still wrong. You've forgotten death,
Leonard could not understand.

You've forgotten death was underlined twice. The double underline made Jagannatha curious about Puranik's inner life. He walked past the books. To the east and west of the study, there were huge glass windows. These windows occupied almost three fourth of the walls and had thick blue curtains. Jagannatha looked out of the window. Bharathipura behind the cover of trees, the river and the ash-coloured peak of Manjunatha temple. At the end of the window, he noticed a huge radio on a corner table. Puranik sensed his curiosity. He came up to him and said proudly, "I can get almost all the major short-wave stations on that radio." He was quiet for a minute and then stood before the fireplace. Lighting his pipe and with a smile in his eyes, he said, "I am in total retreat. Sripathi must have told you." Jagannatha sat on a sofa near the table. The radio must have taught Puranik his English. Puranik pointed to the sofa with silk cotton cushions near him and told Jagannatha, "This is more comfortable, come."

Jagannatha noticed that not only was Puranik's hair white but so were his eyebrows. As he had hair on his ears too, the sharp-faced, bright eyed Puranik looked like an animal peering from its lair. Blanched face, thin lips, long nose. All his vitality was in Puranik's eyes and his hairy ears. He spoke as if he were reading from a book.

"Yes, I am living here in exile with my books, a few friends like Sripathi, and my ailing wife. Excuse me, I have been conducting a monologue without offering you anything. What will you have to drink?"

Puranik slid open the glass door of a side-table. Stored in it were imported whisky, gin, wine and sherry. He took out cut glass goblets and looked at Jagannatha quizzically. Jagannatha, who had given up drinking since his return, and feeling somewhat hesitant because of Rao's presence said," I am not particular about any. Thanks." "Have some whisky," Puranik said, "I can assure you, it's not adulterated. My friend Adhvani brings it from Bombay for me. It's awfully cold now although we have a bright

day today," said Puranik and poured whisky into lovely cut glass goblets. Adding soda from Prabhu's factory, he said, "Tell me when to stop. You must excuse this awful soda and sorry there is no ice."

He gave Jagannatha his glass saying, "The teetotaller will have fresh lime as usual." He pressed a call bell. A cook dressed in white appeared at the door. "Nayar, get Sripathi a fresh lime," ordered Puranik. That was the first Kannada sentence from Puranik that Jagannatha had heard and felt that Puranik's Kannada was more artificial than his English.

Puranik placed his pipe on the radio, stood before the fireplace, savouring his whisky and asked Jagannatha, "What have you been doing in this medieval town?" Jagannatha, curious about Puranik's reaction to his planned step, said, "Have you seen today's paper?" He glanced at Rao. He seemed to ask Rao to explain things. Meanwhile, Puranik remembered something else, and drawing on his pipe, addressed Jagannatha, "Excuse me. I have a problem which only Mr. Jagannath can solve. As you perhaps know, I have never been abroad. A cold climate would kill me as my lungs are weak. For nearly forty years now I have lived in this room amidst these books and my pictures. Early in the morning and in the evening I walk round my garden." He pointed at the garden surrounding the house.

"This is my world and I meet nobody. Yet I inhabit a larger world thanks to my radio. Last night I heard *Swan Lake*. God knows from which station and it was not a bad performance. It was perhaps midday where it was played, and doesn't it fill you with wonder?"

Puranik paced the room talking to himself. Jagannatha observed that Puranik's back was a little bent and the rear of his woollen trousers was worn out.

"I have never stepped out of my compound, but have mentally reconstructed all the famous places in London. Look, I was about to ask you for a clarification and I began to wander."

Puranik asked Jagannatha to come to the writing table. He drew a street map of London on a sheet of paper and said,

"If you enter Fleet Street from this end, you can see the dome of St. Paul's, can't you? Where do you find the pub that the great Doctor Johnson inhabited? To our right or left?"

"Right, perhaps," said Jagannatha and added, "If you go this way, you hit Gough Square. There, you find the house in which Dr. Johnson lived while compiling his dictionary. Now, it has become Dr. Johnson's museum." Jagannatha drew a street map to show all that. Said Puranik, "I know that. Thanks a lot. Do you know how many books I have read to locate some of these famous historical places? The book I read was vague about this pub. And I haven't slept many nights trying to figure out whether it was to the right of the street or left."

Puranik's eyes gleamed with joy. "To the right then. . . good," he muttered to himself. He seemed to be in a world of his own for a moment. Then, happy, he spoke looking at Jagannatha.

"You must be tired of listening only to me. You must meet my friend. I shall bring him here." He went to another room. Jagannatha took a look at Sripathi Rao, who sat on the sofa, cross-legged, wearing a khadi dhoti and a short-sleeved shirt. And not only that, as was his habit, he was smearing chunam on betel leaves. It seemed as if the smile on his face was meant to provoke Jagannatha. He tried to explain this smile to Jagannatha, "Puranik's estate is disappearing bit by bit. For years, not a single tenant has seen his face nor has Puranik tried to meet one. All business is conducted by his shanbhog who has become a big overfed rat. And this friend of his is another big rat. In four to five years his trousers will be in tatters. Overdrawing has already started."

"My friend, Adhvani," Puranik thus introduced a man wearing a polo-neck sweater and baggy trousers. Adhvani staggered to his seat. Jagannatha could smell liquor from where he sat. Adhvani was about forty years old. Watching him in Puranik's English-style study, Jagannatha thought that there was something bizarre about the whole thing. Even as he was thinking this, his attention was drawn by the strangeness of Adhvani's face. There was, on the left part of Adhvani's forehead, a burn mark, left there by the branding done to fulfil a pledge made to Bhootharaya. Contrary to Puranik's clean-shaven face, civilized stance and demeanour, Adhvani's eyes had wax-like deposits and his face a four-day black and white stubble. He did not seem to have washed his face at all that morning.

"Drink is the only consolation of a lonely life, you see," Puranik said to hide the embarrassment caused by his friend's condition. He continued, "He does all my shopping for me. Hence, you can guess how well-travelled he must be within this country."

Jagannatha could see that Puranik was trying to provoke Adhvani to talk. Adhvani gulped his drink put the glass down, wiped his mouth with his hand and said, "Mr. Puranik is a great gentleman. He is my refuge. I run away from my home to this place everyday. My home is infected, you understand, by pilgrims."

Adhvani slurred his words. Puranik, feeling awkward at Adhvani's flattery, wished to change the topic. He said, "Mr. Adhvani is an agnostic, but he claims he has psychic powers. Perhaps he has. For myself, I don't believe in any of that kind of stuff. Mr. Adhvani claims that he was a medium once and Bhootharaya used to speak through him. I have always laughed at this kind of nonsense, yet I would like to do some research, you know, in this area."

Adhvani was encouraged. Slurring his words, he argued that psychic powers were real. Showing the mark on his forehead, he said that because of that burn mark, he had an element of Bhootharaya in him. "Look at my eyes. Don't you feel like looking at them perpetually?" He boasted that he had protected Puranik from many evils. He spoke harshly about the pilgrims. He blamed his shrewish wife for driving him out of the house by having all her relatives stay there. Drunk, he talked melodramatically, saying that he was sure that Puttamma and Puranik would never abandon him. He added that he was suspicious of his wife's fidelity, that her maternal uncle had used black magic to grab his wealth and that, thanks to his own psychic powers, the plot had not succeeded. He ranted and raved that he would finish off his wife's uncle before the coming New Moon Day and that he had already told Bhootharaya everything. Starting in English he switched to Kannada as soon as he began to groan and rage. Puranik looked at his friend seriously and led him inside kindly but firmly. After a few minutes, he came back and spoke with concern.

"You must pardon my friend's misbehaviour. For Mr. Jagannath who has seen cocktail parties this may not be an unusual

sight. Mr. Adhvani needs more of Russell. He is very sensible and helpful, but breaks down when he drinks. He is very unhappy, you see."

Puranik had not lost his composure. He said, "Let me fill your glass." Jagannatha said, "No, thanks" and got up because he felt he should leave immediately. But he could not draw Puranik's attention. Puranik seemed to be totally absorbed in something he was thinking. He said, "The only way is to westernise ourselves. Look at Adhvani's tragedy. This country grabs you by the neck when you are weak."

Rao, who had been silent all this time, seeing Jagannatha agitated, asked Puranik, "Have you seen today's paper?"

"No. It is ages since I looked at newspapers. Does anything new ever happen in this country?."

This took Jagannatha by surprise and before he could point to the radio and ask, Puranik said, "I abhor news. I listen only to music, and occasionally to serious talk and poetry." Jagannatha wondered whether even the barber, who must come at least once a month to cut Puranik's hair, chose not to speak about Bharathipura to him. He thought that Rao's explanation of his intended action to Puranik sounded absurd. Rao using Jagannatha's words to explain things was making it worse. Perhaps he appeared to be a fool in Puranik's eyes. But Puranik listened to all that Rao said quite seriously and remarked,

"I wish you good luck, Mr. Jagannath. I was also a rebel once, you see." He sighed, was silent for a minute and then continued, "I am sorry, but it is utterly futile. In India we live in the womb of God. Perhaps you can save yourself, and a few others who are like you. But collective action is impossible. Therefore I say — westernise yourself. Stay sane. But don't attempt to change this country. She is amorphous."

Puranik spoke as if he were delivering a speech. Jagannatha was indeed frightened, hearing the phrase he himself often used, "womb of God" from Puranik. He said to Rao, "Rayare, let's go."

Puranik said, "My young friend, you must excuse my pessimism. I admire your impatience; it is healthy. I also once took an interest in this town. Then I did some research on Bhootharaya, who, according to me, is the god of passion and psychic energy.

Unlike Manjunatha who represents the intellectual and religious aspect of Indian thinking—which is hypocritical—I need not add that—I wrote down all the fascinating songs and tales about Bhootharaya which I collected from peasants. I was a very young man then and very impatient, like Mr. Jagannath now. In those days of bomb throwing, Bhootharaya fascinated me and I wondered why and how he came to be. . .."

"Subjugated . . ." Jagannatha filled in.

"Yes, subjugated to the Nirguna Brahman[1], the God of the hypocritical Indian liberal. The material is still with me. I shall search for it and give it to you. You can make use of it if you like."

"Shall we go?" So saying, Jagannatha took a step. Rao stood there without any urgency or agitation. Puranik's shiny black shoes, closely shaven cheeks, his slightly bent posture with his hands gripped at the back—Jagannatha was astonished by the self-confidence that this tidiness reflected. Puranik's trousers were wearing out. His English still had shades of Kannada, his intimate friend Adhvani had faith in the antics of Bhootharaya. . . Jagannatha, noting all of these things, tried to view Puranik with good humour and compassion. But in Puranik's grave eyes, there was wisdom, there was irony and tragic sense. Was it possible then, living right here in Bharathipura, to skip several centuries? When would Puranik realize that this skipping of time was unreal, an illusion? Probably when he went bankrupt.

A new question arose in Jagannatha's mind. Why did he not, in spite of being with Puranik all this time, in spite of being challenged to a discussion, tell Puranik bluntly, "Mr. Puranik, you are living in an illusory world of your own creation!" Did he tolerate Puranik unconsciously, as he would a child? Did Rao too have this compassionate, forgiving attitude towards Puranik? Did Puranik not realize that he produced such a reaction in his audience? Jagannatha felt that he should return and probe Puranik a little more. He was sorry that his projected action did not touch

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[1] the 'creator' who is an abstraction free from any specific qualities.

Puranik in any way. Would the worm ever penetrate this fort to bite this Parikshitraja?[1]

Feeling an unease beyond all thought, Jagannatha again asked Sripathi Rao, "Shall we go?" "Sorry if I have bored you. It is the silence of the place which makes me unpleasant to meet, you see," said Puranik and extended his hand. He looked at Jagannatha with affection. Jagannatha felt ashamed of himself. He shook Puranik's slim hand. Rao said, "I would like to see your wife." "Oh yes," Puranik said as if he had just woken up. "You have a very soothing effect on her." He turned to Jagannatha and apologised, "Sorry, she can't come up. If you don't mind the trouble, please come down with us." "Not at all," replied Jagannatha and joined the other two.

As they moved out of the hall, Jagannatha felt that he was entering a different world altogether. He had not expected to find the usual things in this house: doors through which one had to pass head lowered, dark rooms, short shelves, rangoli[2] on the threshold, pictures of Radha and Krishna drawn on a mirror, dried festoons.

"Sorry, you have to walk carefully. This is a very old part of the house you see. My eccentricity made me build the other parts of the house," Puranik explained. He led Jagannatha by the hand with needless civility. He entered a room and called out softly, "Savithri."

Her face bleached, Savithri tried to get up on hearing her husband's voice. "Please don't bother. Lie down. Sripathi has come to see you." Puranik spoke with great love and concern. Savithri's withered face bloomed on seeing Rao's face. She looked like a young girl. Rao went close to her and asked, "Did you recognise Jagannatha?"

"Are you all right? When did you return from England?" Savithri asked Jagannatha very politely.

She turned to Rao again, "It appears Jois' daughter-in-law died. How sad! I had heard that she was very attractive."

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[1] a king who earned the wrath of a sage in penance and was cursed with death by snake-bite. Despite all caution, he was killed by a worm in the fruit he was about to eat.

[2] auspicious and ornamental designs drawn with various coloured powders on the floor, in front of a house or an idol.

Seeing that they were standing, she said, "Why are you standing? Please sit down." She looked at her husband wanting him to help her get up.

"Stay in bed. Don't bother about us," Puranik comforted her and caressed her forehead.

What surprised Jagannatha more than this love between husband and wife was the presence of Manjunatha's photo in the room. The photo had an offering of roses. And next to Savithri's bed was a copy of the Udupi Sri Krishna Almanac[1]. "The Chariot Festival[2] of the New Moon is round the corner," said Savithri and glanced at Rao who said, "Yes."

All three left the room to let her rest. Puranik shook Rao's hand in the hall and said, "Thanks for cheering up my wife." Then he turned to Jagannatha and remarked, "I both admire you, and feel sorry for you." He shook Jagannatha's hand again with love and sadness. "Come again when you want to relax." Jagannatha hurried out of the house with Rao. Saluting, the gurkha at the gate saw them out, and locked the gate.

Ten

Manjunatha invaded even Parikshitraja in the form of a boring worm. He was in everything. The ground under the shiny shoes of the man who could skip centuries while he existed in the present was sinking. Prabhu was better, one could fight with him. He was not unreal like Puranik. Jagannatha told Rao that it was healthier to cheat by getting involved with reality than to deal with an illusion. Puranik, who believed he was outside the womb of God was himself inert like the ones inside. "Mr. Rao, by becoming increasingly liberal, you too are becoming inert," Jagannatha commented. He argued that unless Bharathipura writhed in the throes of a great change, life there would never become creative.

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[1] a calender or almanac comprising solar and lunar days, named after Lord Krishna of Udupi, a place in Karnataka.

[2] the car-festival, a procession of an idol mounted on a huge wooden chariot.

Rao said, "All that's fine in theory. Meanwhile, children have to be borne, raised, holy festivals like Ramanavami[1], Krishnashtami[2] have to be celebrated, medicines have to be brought from Doctor Anthony. Jaganna, you are still an egoist. You believe in your power to achieve things. Well, people like you are also necessary."

Jagannatha fell silent feeling that it was useless to argue with Rao who spoke for the sheer thrill of speaking. As they were crossing Seebinakere, Rao said, "If you attempt a grand revolution all at once, you may end up like Puranik."

They had arrived at the square. In one of the lanes, stood a shop Jagannatha had known since boyhood—that of an umbrella repairer who sat on a stool. Patching up torn umbrella cloth, replacing broken wires and stringing them up, repairing the catch mechanism that held the umbrella open and prevented it from collapsing—the name of the man who knew how to do these intricate things was Ramappa. He sat in black cap and spectacles, a figure of concentration. Even on that day, he was wearing a soiled black cap. There was a sign-board tied to a post near him. To Jagannatha, this board with its crooked letters had been a source of humour because it said, "Umbrella Repair Rangappa." To his surprise, there stood the same board looking just the same. Rao apprised him of Rangappa's current life. "His daughter who did her S.S.L.C. at the high school here ran away with some lorry driver to Bombay. Now, Rangappa is all alone."

Having perhaps reached the end of the thought that was troubling him, Rao spoke abruptly, "I agree that to spend a lifetime cleaning the bottoms of others is no real action. One should build canals, let the water in, and teach others to clean their own bottoms."

Jagannatha laughed. He had remembered something while they walked through Seebinakere and asked Rao, "How is Kamala?" Rao had replied, "Who? That Seebinakere Kamala who was your classmate? I hear she is in Bombay." Now, Rao said, "I will come to your house to eat. Chikki has been insisting that I should come." Rao thus invited himself. Jagannatha

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[1] Lord Rāma's birthday; the hero of the epic *Ramayana*.

[2] Lord Krishna's birthday.

told him, "Mr. Rao, you know how scared I was watching Puranik, possibly because it is so easy for me to be like him. Whatever the case, people of our class are quite capable of skipping several centuries to escape from the present. But these people cannot." Jagannatha pointed at the Shudra women who walked about busily. Rao said, "What you say is certainly true." "That's why fighting Manjunatha seems so right," Jagannatha responded intensely wishing to convince Rao. Rao winked and said, "It will be like fighting the wind." Jagannatha was discouraged to see that Rao could not fully understand all his thoughts and feelings. He felt that it was better to spend his time with the untouchables than to argue with Rao.

He remembered Kamala again. Probably, she had grown fat and ugly. Suddenly he was reminded of Subraya Adiga. He had not seen Adiga for many days. He should; Adiga would definitely rush to him on hearing the news.

Town of Jagannatha's boyhood. People he had known from babyhood, who had grown with him, his consciousness influenced by western thought, Nagamani, Kaveri, Margaret, the untouchable youths, his weakness for feeding his ego by looking for his own image in the mirror of others eyes, his longing to root, sprout and blossom here, this Rao — everything seemed to be in a tangled mess. He would grow shiny and sloppy here. He should again and again simplify and solidify himself in action. There was no other choice at all. "*Margaret, I am desperate.*" Nagamani's suicide had made it imperative that he do something, anything, except idleness. Would the untouchables ready themselves to touch him? That was the key question.

By the time he came home, he felt well exercised and hungry. Lunch was at one o'clock. It was only noon yet. Chikki was waiting in the hall, her eyes swollen with weeping. Having Rao with him made it possible for Jagannatha to ask her. "What is the matter, Chikki?" Chikki answered with great difficulty, "It doesn't look like anyone will come here to eat today." Something that had not happened before at Jagannatha's house. There would be at least twenty everyday at any mealtime. Today, after hearing of Jagannatha's plan, not a soul had

even approached his house. Jagannatha did not know what to say. He was both alarmed and hurt.

"Rao will eat here," he told Chikki, pleased to see Chikki's delight at this. He indicated to Rao that he should help Chikki to be courageous, and went to the verandah on the pretence of some work or other.

He was glad to see Subraya Adiga, bare chested carrying a bag of dried banana leaves on his head and bunches of banana leaf cups hanging from both his shoulders. Adiga's face streamed with perspiration. On his neck and back were spread the patch, which they used to make fun of as Manjunatha's ash. Even though he had aged, he had strong teeth. Jagannatha's joy made him speechless.

Adiga said, "I will give these to the temple and be back. Tell Chikki I will eat here. I have a lot to say to you."

Adiga's eyes were tranquil. He must surely have heard the news because he had come through the town square. But yet, he did not seem disturbed. Jagannatha told him, "Yes, do come back. Let's talk." Chikki, wrapped in conversation with Rao did not believe that Adiga would come to eat there. Said Jagannatha "He knows that but still said he would come." Chikki bustled off to the kitchen and Jagannatha went up the steps with Rao. "I will tell you a story." So Jagannatha began sipping his coffee. Because he had suddenly felt guilty in front of Chikki, he wanted to unburden himself talking.

Eleven

As Rao finished his coffee and began spreading chunam on his chewing tobacco, Jagannatha began his boyhood tale.

"Rayare, there is a gulf of five rupees between me and asceticism. Do you know, the day I return the five rupees I stole from Subraya Adiga, will be the day I become a mystic, clapping and dancing before Manjunatha," said Jagannatha amusingly. However, the memory had agitated him. Even Rao,

who had no particular interest in such subtleties of the mind, listened sympathetically. Jagannatha spoke with intensity. When Jagannatha was in high school, Subraya Adiga was very dear to him. He was the kind of free spirit who, soon after marriage, on a sudden impulse, had turned other-worldly and taken off on a tour of the entire country. He could speak and read English and Hindi. A favourite of Jagannatha's mother, he would sing Mirabai's[1] devotional songs. Mother would accompany him on the veena — scrivener Krishnaiah would sit by and listen. Adiga would tell stories of climbing the Himalayas and going round Hrishikesh[2] and Badri[3]. This theatrical description of the serene beauty of those distant places used to make Jagannatha lose himself in another world. "Jaganna, do you know what it is like to stand on top of the mountain on a clear day and look down? The abyss was thousands of feet deep. But everything so clear, so pure that if you threw a coin down, you could watch its shining fall till it hit the bottom." Whenever Adiga described such things, he would slowly take out a pinch of snuff from his box. He would relive the joyful experience of that beauty in the North and watch Jagannatha who was totally absorbed.

Adiga came home every day to teach Jagannatha Sanskrit. He was so genuinely and crazily intense that Jagannatha had seen him, holding aloft a Vishnukranti[4] flower, separating it from the grass that surrounded it. He would contemplate "Neelamegha Shyama[5]" and break down in utter abandon. Once, he took Jagannatha far from Bharathipura, deep into the forest and made him sit on the bank of a pond, next to a ruined Jain temple. There was not a soul in sight. It was evening. Adiga danced rapturously and talked excitedly about the avatars of God. They could hear a flute being played by some shepherd boy. Adiga began to sing melodiously the famous devotional song, "*Krishna, come to me soon.*" Jagannatha was ashamed and

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[1] a 15th century woman-poet and saint, devotee of Lord Krishna who wrote devotional poetry of the highest order in Hindi.

[2–3] centres of pilgrimage in North India.

[4] a tiny, bluish wild flower which grows wild along with grass.

[5] refers to Lord Krishna whose complexion was dark.

ill at ease. Especially after he discovered that Adiga was imagining him to be baby Krishna, he felt a dread. "Jaganna, you are not just an ordinary boy. You are also a great devotee like the sage Shukamuni[1], "Adiga raved. Jagannatha had therefore felt ashamed of his special fondness for something so ordinary as kodubale[2]. Adiga's life was one of unadulterated divine intoxication. Cutting banana leaves from the plant, drying them in the sun, making leaf-plates and cups from them, hand-weaving sacred threads for Brahmins, getting a special kind of grass from the river bank... that was how Adiga made a living. When asked, he would officiate as a priest at religious ceremonies, accept whatever money was offered and tuck it into the folds of the dhoti around the waist. He maintained his family on such meagre earnings. But anyone who came by his house was offered food and coffee, or at least, lemon juice sweetened with jaggery. There was to be no dearth of anything. A house full of children with a new one every year. A child crying here, another passing urine and splashing it there. A third one with a running nose, eating a fruit. In the midst of it all, Adiga praised God, spinning yarn on a handloom. Or else, he sang the praises of some stupid godman or a devoted widow, discussed a comment by Shankara[3] or Ramanuja[4] or Madhva[5] or a sentence in the Upanishads, totally losing himself in the process.

Subraya Adiga found no fault in anyone. His theory was that while in some hearts, the Almighty took on a vivid shape, He remained blurred in others because He was surrounded by the individual's ego.

Houseful of children. Some died. Some survived. But Adiga lived his life undaunted, matching his daily walk to the market

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[1] an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu, who narrated the story of Lord Krishna's life to King Parikshith.

[2] a spicy, fried savoury made of rice flour, coconut and red chillies.

[3] the great Vedantic philosopher who lived in the eighth or ninth century preached a strict nondualism and founded the sect of Smartha Brahmins.

[4] 11th century the foremost name in Indian philosophy after Sri Shankara. He differed from Sri Shankara in maintaining a "modified non-dualism." Sri Ramanuja's influence was great and led to the worship of a personalised deity in India.

[5] a celebrated Vaishnava teacher, of the 13th century. He maintained that the Divine Being and the soul of man are two, separate and distinct.

to sell leaf-plates and cups with the number of times he uttered "Achutananda Govinda[1]"and buying Doctor Anthony's medicine. His wife, who knew how many children died, how many were born, whose birthday was when, died in childbirth. Yes, she died, the lucky one, but life had to go on, and he, who was on the road most of the time, could not bring up these young children, and so, he married his wife's sister. And he had a few more children by her. How many? Why? Subraya Adiga would smile sadly and wonder how many births he had to undergo in order to get rid of this weakness of the flesh. He would say that Manjunatha was not only the lord of the celibate but also of the sensualist and that he was sworn to the life of a family man.

Once, during his married life, he had turned unworldly. That was when he wandered around the country and met ascetics and holy men. He claimed that he had a"wheel" mark on the sole of his foot and was therefore destined to travel. That was also when he went to a prayer meeting at the Wardha ashram run by Gandhiji who was engaged in achieving deliverance through action as worship. He had earned Gandhiji's favour by offering his earring or a ring hanging from his sacred thread to the Harijan fund.

As the fire of renunciation cooled, his feet turned homeward. What did he see when he returned? His sister, a child widow, had become pregnant. He did not blame his sister. He did not heed his wife's nagging. His sister's stomach grew big and the town gossiped. She got someone to abort the child—what else could be done? That was her destiny. But was there any choice but to perform the ghatashraadha[2]? At the same time, did he not have to feed his children by working as an officiating priest? Did he not have to suffer the consequences of all his actions, bad and good? Thinking along these lines, he excommunicated his sister but kept her in the house. She slept and ate on the verandah. She cut banana leaves and brought them home. She shaved her head according to the custom and Adiga praised her detachment as being greater than his own. Who

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[1] one of the thousand names of Lord Vishnu.
[2] funeral rites performed for a living person as if he or she were dead.

would or could attend to the temple chores like she did? She would not enter the house and pollute anything. She wiped and washed the yard everyday. Somehow, she lived like water drops on a lotus leaf, neither attached nor detached, working out her destiny. She did not lose her love for her brother. Nor did he lose his affection for her. They left the right or wrong of it all to Manjunatha. Even the town approved Adiga's stand. Was there a house anywhere without skeletons in its closet?

Subraya Adiga had taken a fancy to Jagannatha. Because his mother liked Adiga, Jagannatha respected him even more. He was surprised that this shirtless man could speak English. Adiga had collected many books in English about Hinduism during his pilgrimage. Swami Shivananda of Hrishikesh had blessed him and given him autographed copies of his books. Adiga would give Jagannatha his books, sit before him and sing. Once, he gave Jagannatha a book called, *Celibacy is Life, Ejaculation Death* and said, "This tough way of life has been impossible for me. See if it is possible for you. When I think how I had wet dreams right in Hrishikesh, I know that I can never free myself from the way of the flesh." Jagannatha who had begun to discover the possibilities of bodily pleasures felt humiliated and guilty reading the book.

This God-crazy Adiga actually went mad once—this man who considered the blotch on his back to be sacred ash, who wept while singing holy songs, who laughed while crying, who danced in the wildreness, who spent whatever little savings he had on serving a feast to Brahmins during the month of Karthika, who had attractive eyes, who was elsewhere while being here—this man went mad. Stark mad. He would throw stones. He would bite if someone came close to him. He would spit. He would get up at midnight and cry aloud. He would fly into a rage when he saw his wife—the news was all round town. Mustering enough courage, Jagannatha went to see him. Adiga started crying. Jagannatha waited for him to turn into an ascetic. But his madness receded and he withdrew into himself. Jagannatha took this withdrawal to be a pure state of contemplation.

Jagannatha's mother was alarmed at the way her son was changing as he followed Adiga. Sensing his mother's fear, Jagannatha overdid his renunciation, gave up his regular breakfast and started eating tulsi leaves. Closing his eyes occasionally while talking, then opening them wide and becoming silent, laughing in between, speaking about shocking things with hands raised and neck slanted to the right—he did these imitations of Adiga to add to his mother's consternation.

At this time, Seebinakere Kamala, the one who went to Bombay later, was a high school student. Jagannatha, whose classmate she was, would walk with a grave face in the midst of boys who made fun of Kamala by translating such English words as "leaf," "lotus," "pearl," "umbrella" into Kannada. The four words together made a sentence "O Kamala, give me a kiss." He would wipe off such grafitti which appeared daily on the wall. In the eyes of Jagannatha who had been influenced by Sharat Chandra's[1] progressive novels, *Devdas*[2] and *Sheshaprashna*[3], Kamala, a prostitute's daughter, became the ideal woman. His gravity increased for the boys respected him as the son of the richest family in town. Adiga's mysticism, the praise of his teachers, the wealth of his family, his mother's love, the emotionality of Sharat Chandra's novels—all these things churned his mind, and Jagannatha could not see the ground on which he walked.

However, Jagannatha was boiling inside. His love for Kamala, the goddess of his inner world, was pure, but he heard that Rangaiah, son of a small time lawyer named Thimmaiah and shapeless as a bison, had played the tabla to Kamala's singing, had given her a handkerchief as a gift and under the pretext of joint study, stayed in her house overnight. And that upset Jagannatha deeply. He could not help fantasizing about what he had accidentally read in *Kaliyuga*[4]—a copy of which he had found in scrivener Krishnaiah's room—featuring Kamala and Rangaiah, Rangaiah gradually disrobing Kamala and then

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[1] one of the greatest Bengali novelists and social thinkers.

[2] name of a well-known novel by Sharat Chandra in which the hero Devdas later became the symbol of unrequited love.

[3] another popular novel by Sharat Chandra.

[4] name of a weekly devoted to sex education.

taking off his own clothes. But he could not tell any of this to anyone. He could neither eat nor sleep nor read, and in that predicament, his efforts to surrender himself completely to Adiga's mysticism were a dismal failure.

At that time there occurred an incident still vividly etched in his mind. Adiga had given Jagannatha Shivananda's book on saints, covered with an old issue of the newspaper, *Tainadu*. Out of sheer idle curiosity Jagannatha removed the cover. A crisp five-rupee note fell out of it. Jagannatha wondered why Adiga had hidden it so. From whom was he hiding it? Had he saved it for a rainy day? Jagannatha was surprised that Adiga who was so detached and unworldly had hidden this money.

What puzzled Jagannatha was his own motive in pocketing the five-rupee note instead of putting it back in its hiding place. He was not in want of anything. Even though his mother did not give him any money, she always bought him whatever he desired. At any rate, from the moment he pocketed the five-rupee note without any qualms, there were many gradual changes in Jagannatha. However, he had never been able to understand the significance of this event that had opened up so many chinks in the world in which he lived.

Jagannatha could only narrate what actually happened, but not its meaning. He had never hidden anything from his mother untill then. But, from the day he pocketed the money, he would carefully transfer the note from one dress to another whenever he changed clothes, making sure that his mother did not catch him. To accomplish that, he discovered many unfrequented corners in the house. Strangely enough, because of this secret hidden from his mother, he could experience fully the love she expressed in rubbing his back, in caressing his hair and talking to him intimately. As the unbearable feeling that he had a secret unknown to dear Chikki, who used to call him affectionately "Jaganna", and to scrivener Krishnaiah, grew, there were subtle changes in his disposition. He became alienated from the people around him,. He must have been reduced by the idea that he had a dark corner in his consciousness, unknown to the adults around him. The fear that came with it brought a new flavour into his life. If some dear friend had

asked him then what he would do with the money, he would have said that he was sure to put it back and return the book.

But what was surprising was that Jagannatha did not do it. He had reached a point when experiencing this theft to its utmost intensity had become inevitable.

One Sunday morning, Adiga arrived, his face and body perspiring, for he had walked rapidly to reach Jagannatha's house on time. He had risen at daybreak, bathed and smeared sandalwood paste on his body. But his eyes were bright with glee. As soon as he saw Jagannatha, he said, "Jaganna do you know what happened? I passed by the cemetery on my way. There was an untouchable digging a grave. Probably to bury a dead calf. His black skin, knotted hair, muscular shoulders, his concentration while digging—all these suddenly reminded me of Neelakantaswamy[1]. As I walked on reminiscing, I remembered what a yogi in the holy place of Kanyakumari had told me. This body should be purified first. It should become so pure that one should not have to clean oneself after excreting waste matter. Just imagine how disciplined the mind and body should become in order to be satisfied with the least possible quantity of food. The yogi said that man might then get close to the state of birds and animals. Well, I have wandered off as usual. I began to say something and ended up with something else. To get back, that untouchable might well have been Lord Parameshwara who inhabits cemeteries. I think... here," Adiga pointed to his head. And then added, pointing to his heart. "If I feel it here, then, I will be free. There won't be any chains." As he spoke the last sentence, he fingered his sacred thread with contempt.

Soon after, he asked, "Where is your mother?" and went inside.

Fear gripped Jagannatha's body. Mother gave them coffee and uppuma. Adiga told them, "They sing Jayadeva's songs beautifully in Orissa. After all, he was born there. Tomorrow, I'll sing some of his songs and Amma will play on the

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[1] a name for Lord Shiva. Neela means blue; kanta means throat; swamy means lord. From the legend that the deadly poison that would have destroyed the world was swallowed by Shiva. His wife Parvathi gripped his throat and thus did his throat turn blue.

veena. How about it?" Jagannatha pretending to have some business in the cowshed, escaped from there. Ganga, who had recently calved and stood tethered to a post in the shed stared at him and looked ready to butt him. Jagannatha, with trembling hands, stashed away the five rupee note under his vest and tucked his undershirt in the folds of his dhoti to secure it. The note that had gone from pocket to pocket in fear of being discovered, was already old from frequent contact with perspiration. Jagannatha came out of the shed and saw Adiga going to the bathroom. He spoke to him in a quiet tone, "Ganga has given birth to a calf. You should see how she threatens to butt anyone who gets close". He went upstairs and started reading something.

Adiga was the official priest at the Neelakanteshwara temple which was under the patronage of Jagannatha's family. For that he received every year, a bag of rice and sixty rupees. Jagannatha heard his mother tell Adiga that she would send the rice by a cart. Adiga used to take off on pilgrimages the minute he got hold of the sixty rupees. Mother asked him, "Where to, this time?" She and Adiga were both climbing the stairs. Adiga replied, "I want to visit the holy place, Kaladi, and travel through the Kerala region." They finished climbing and Jagannatha started perspiring. He felt that even now he could replace the five-rupee note. But, for some reason, he did not budge from his chair. His whole body, however, was damp. He sat staring blankly at the book in front of him, the words on the page blurred. He pretended to be reading even after mother and Adiga stood in front of him. "If you have this kind of concentration, how rapidly you will finish it!" Adiga said. "If you have finished reading Shivananda's book, give it back." Jagannatha "bought" time pretending to have just noticed their presence and started to search for the book in a box. He checked whether he had folded the wrapper precisely the way Adiga had done. But he found himself being uncertain about how Adiga had put the wrapper on the book. Reading an account of a strike in some town in *Tainadu*, he stood not knowing how to act. He was caught in a dilemma between his wanting to return the money and the

inner resistance he felt to taking this step. Both options seemed equally difficult.

Adiga said, "If you have not read it, return it later. There is no urgency" and stepped out of the room. Mother started arranging the books neatly on the table. No one had suspected anything. So, he could have kept the book for a day longer and returned it with the note in the cover. However, strangely, Jagannatha's found himself saying "I have finished reading it. You may take it back." He gave the book back to Adiga. Adiga obviously had not needed the money in the meanwhile. Perhaps he had forgotten altogether that he had hidden this note. Whatever the case, the moment he returned the book brought Jagannatha a curious kind of happiness. He felt he had acquired a freedom hitherto unknown.

Mother also left with Adiga. He closed the door and bolted it. He felt he could do anything he wanted. When he put his hand through his undershirt, everything was wet—the undershirt, the five-rupee note and his sacred thread.

He wanted to get rid of the sacred thread that stuck to his body. Why? If he were to remove it according to the rules of ritual, he had to do so by sliding it down his body and out over his feet, after which he had to put on a new one. However, he took it off through the right sleeve of his shirt and down his arm and over his hand. His face in the mirror reflected fear as well as a smile for having removed his sacred thread in a forbidden fashion. He put the thread away in the trunk. At no time, prior to this moment, had Jagannatha been without it since the day of the sacred thread ceremony. Mother would not know of his bare chest because his shirt covered it. To go about without the sacred thread—was it safe? He came down leisurely to find out first-hand. He stood in front of the room which held the family deity. The priest was making sandalwood paste. He went into the yard. He walked around the barn. The rumour had it that there was an old snake there. Wondering whether his walking about without his sacred thread would pollute the place, he examined the treeholes and snakepits in the gentle morning sunlight. He whistled a familiar tune—"Protect us, Goddess Gouri, the compassionate." He stood under a tree whistling to see whether the snakes would come out as was

the belief. He ran downhill to the road to the market place. The second bus to Shimoga went puffing uphill. He watched it for a while. Then, whistling soundlessly, he took a by-lane to Seebinakere.

Kamala's house was in an alley. Could Rangaiah be there now? Was he sipping coffee with unbrushed teeth, having spent the night there because it was too late to go home? Had he sent for dosas from the restaurant? Rangaiah's father had no regard whatever for society. And his son had no regard for his own father. Jagannatha heard music—a music lesson from Kamala's house—"*Lambodara Lakumikara, sa ri ma ga ri sa ri ga ri sa,*"[1] accompanied by a harmonium! Surely, Rangaiah was reclining on the bed, with his head resting on his hand, listening to Kamala's music. Jagannatha was in agony. There was no one on the street. Yet, he walked as if he was busy with something. His body was damp again. Grocery store, oil shop, a grandfather, his grandson scratching his back, a naked child gleaming with oil, trying to escape from his mother; a house-servant who said, "Master, so early in the morning, here!"—Watching all this and trying to impress with his confident air that he had not come there for Kamala, he went to the town square. He walked down the main street. Then, he took the Chariot Street to the temple.

He remembered that as a Brahmin, he was not supposed to enter the temple without his sacred thread, but he stepped in. People inside made way in deference to the son of the landlord. The door of the sanctum sanctorum was not yet open. He could see the two ever-burning oil lamps inside through the holes in the door. He pressed his palms together in worship out of sheer habit. Sesame oil, incense sticks, frankincense, red champaka flowers—there was the combined smell of all these.

He held his palms together and raised them, not knowing why. His hand searched for the big bell, donated by his forefathers to be rung only in the afternoon. He felt a tingling sensation thinking of how the bell was heard by the whole town.

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[1] a popular classical note addressed to Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed god.

He touched the smooth end of the bell's tongue. Next minute, he was leaping up in the air and ringing the bell! People there were dumbfounded and looked at Jagannatha. Someone in a corner, alarmed, screamed, "That bell rings only at the time of the final service of the day!" But Jagannatha was shaking like a man possessed. His body, tingling with the sound of brass, leaped up again and again. Jagannatha, drunk with the knowledge of how this untimely boom would mystify the whole town of Bharathipura, leaped up and down repeatedly ringing the bell till someone caught hold of him thinking that he had been possessed by a spirit and rubbed his back trying to calm him down. They gave him holy water to drink and sprinkled it over his head. Everyone agreed when someone suggested that Bhootharaya was angry and so, he had sent a demon to possess Jagannatha. They smeared vermilion on his forehead with awe. They thanked Bhootharaya for having sent a warning signal this way, through Jagannatha.

Jagannatha came out of the temple, a hero in everybody's eyes. He walked homeward in silence. His face was red and his ears warm with the echoes of that ringing sound. He walked, still intoxicated by the heady sound. He encountered many familiar faces and felt elated that no one knew his secret. Suddenly he turned into Seebinakere Street for the second time that morning. He realized that some well-wisher had been following him right from the temple. He "lost" him and ran to the alley where Kamala lived. A shop selling betel-leaf was round the alley's corner. Subba, born to Hotel Sundaraiah's prostitute, was rolling up cone-shaped beedas[1] and securing them with cloves. He would display them in the slots on a tree-like rack made of wiring. He had to make just two more beedas to finish loading the rack. Jagannatha stood there watching. He moved away as soon as a police constable with a baton saluted him. Then, he encountered a barber with a box. From a house on the left, he could hear the sound of something being fried. The fragrance. Someone came to the door and spat out a morsel of something and went back in, talking enthusiastically. The morning heat began to rise. Jagannatha reached the front of Kamala's house and stood

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[1] betel leaf and nuts with calcium smeared on it.

there. There was no sound of the harmonium. Next to the front door was a print of the painting, *Damayanthi*[1], by Ravi Varma[2]. There was a festoon of rings and rinds hanging from the top of the door. There was not a soul anywhere, just a crow and a dog in the gutter. Jagannatha went up the open verandah of Kamala's house and thrust the five-rupee note through a window. He immediately leaped onto the road and ran. He was afraid that all the eyes of the town were at his back. He looked back and found none. The dog did its duty of barking a couple of times and fell silent. Mother anxiously watched him return home running. Somebody must have come from the temple and already told her that Bhootharaya had spoken through Jagannatha. But mother did not say a word about it. Jagannatha ran upstairs to his room, put on his sacred thread in a hurry and came down. Mother, who was standing speechless till now, came to him and cracked her knuckles to ward off the evil spirit.

Twelve

After Jagannatha finished his story of the five-rupee note, Rao merely smiled and said, "Come, let's go and see what Chikki is doing." They both sat on the wooden boards laid out for them. Chikki said, "Please restrain your appetite for half an hour more," and asked, "Shall I give you some snacks?" Rao said, "No."

Chikki herself was making jilebis[3] in the kitchen. Jilebis were Adiga's favourite sweet dish. Jagannatha smiled at the festive way in which Chikki was reacting to the news of Adiga staying on for lunch. Her grief over not having the usual twenty to twenty-five people to eat the rice and curry prepared in huge pots, seemed to have diminished somewhat. She must

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[1] the beautiful princess of Vidarbha who was married to prince Nala.

[2] a popular painter of Indian mythological characters; his painting of Shakuntala writing a love letter to Dushyantha made him famous. He belonged to the royal family of Travancore, Kerala.

[3] a sweet, fried in ghee and dipped in sugar syrup.

have found solace in the fact that there were servants and the untouchable woman who worked in the cow shed, to eat the food.

Chikki was fond of the woman. Jagannatha had heard Chikki say jokingly about her, "She litters like a sow." It was when she was not in madi[1] that Chikki chatted with this untouchable woman about things ranging from her numerous children to her husband's infidelity, her eldest son's drinking, her younger daughter's elopement with an untouchable from Thirthahalli, and about another son not showing his face since he went to Chikkamagalur to work on a coffee plantation and yet another child of hers being possessed by an evil spirit. Such diverse talk occupied Chikki's time before she had her bath. Kneading some flour, Chikki asked Sripathi Rao, "When they have something to sleep on and something to cover themselves with, what do they need to enter the temple for?"

Jagannatha was happy that Chikki addressed the subject directly.

"Chikki, it is not that simple. Our life here will acquire a meaning only when these people at the lowest level rebel. See how the poor farmers of Vietnam are fighting a mighty nation like America. That is the most amazing thing of our time. The same holds true for the Black American's struggle. When such people stand up for their rights, it is not only their lives that blossom but ours too. Unless the untouchables become fully human, we too will remain incomplete as human beings."

Jagannatha, noticing resentment on Chikki's face, felt ashamed of sounding like a public speaker.

"Jaganna, I don't understand all this. It seems that untouchables get paid if they send their children to school. You know what they do with the money? They spend it on drink. Unless they feel the need for betterment within themselves everything you do will be a waste," Chikki said, sighing.

"Chikki, it isn't like that. True, they won't change immediately because we help. But they should stand up and defy us. Then, they will feel they too are human. We have made

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[1] cleanliness, ritual purity, a state of non-defilement.

them think that they are untouchables. That's awful. That's why I..."

"Jaganna, whatever you do, don't forget our family's honour. Don't be like Hanumantha, the Monkey-God who leapt up to eat the sun and got burned in the face. Ask Rao. He will tell you how when you were a baby, you were unconscious for three days. Adiga held you in his lap and prayed to Mrutyunjaya[1]. Your mother kept crying as she sat praying that you, her only son, be spared. I can still see it all. Everyone here was fasting. You did not revive even when they branded you to try and ward off the evil. Finally, you opened your eyes as soon as your mother swore that she would offer a gold crown to Lord Manjunatha. Is it proper for you to forget all that now?"

Rao was watching Chikki sympathetically. Jagannatha noticing how tense Chikki was, decided that he had better keep quiet. Rao tried to comfort Chikki, "Don't worry. Don't think Jagannatha will act rashly."

Rao and Jagannatha went upstairs. It was one o' clock. Subraya Adiga joined them. Rao said, "Still half an hour left for lunch. Adigare, you wouldn't object to playing cards till then would you?" Said Adiga, "Well three hands. We will play twenty-eight.[2]"

Jagannatha agreed reluctantly and said, "What shall we do about a deck of cards?" Rao replied, "Look in that niche in the wall, there must be a pack."

Rao told Adiga, "If I had not known how to play cards, I would have gone mad in jail."

Adiga smiled and said, "What else can we do in the rainy season? We are either at the spinning wheel or playing cards."

Jagannatha, looking for a pack, wondered why he was not like these people who could say "yes" to everything. Well, even that was not true. Hadn't Rao set fire to mill cloth? Hadn't Adiga gone mad about God and mysticism? However, people who got involved in their surroundings, whatever they happened to be, were entirely different. In his circle, probably only mother was like that. Milk cows, cook

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[1] the Conqueror of Death.

[2] a card-game.

food, be hospitable. Celebrate festivals and holidays, give gifts to friends and relatives. Enjoy singing and the bustle of festive occasions—mother could lose herself in any such activity. Adiga used to say that there were several stages to go through before launching any important undertaking: meditation, concentration, remembrance, understanding, study, practice, achievement. What stage was Jagannatha in now?

No pack of cards in the niche. Margaret liked politics, museums, splendid clothes, window-shopping. However, he was now committed to a single purpose.

Adiga used to say that without inner strength, man's yoga would be polluted in the act of living. He often quoted a Sanskrit line meaning, "It is yoga that helps man to still his wandering mind." Jagannatha's mind did revolve around a single idea, but he could not yet fully visualize untouchables as the focal point. Long shadows that approached him in the late evening, dark bodies listening to him from afar and returning to their huts. What did they do when they were drinking? How exactly did they have sex at night? What did they think of? How did they show their love for their children? How did they cry? No! He did not know. Even their names slipped away—who was Pilla? Who was Kariya? Who was Mada...?

He went into his mother's room to see if his trunk of high school years had a deck of cards. His old dented brass trunk was with him until he had left Shimoga. He now opened it. Note books from high school days. It was scrivener Krishnaiah's task to buy blank sheets from Shenoy's Store and get them bound. He had in those days an Uttaramukhi[1] pen. Later, a Blackbird. How Margaret used to make fun of the shawl given to him by his mother—a smooth, knitted shawl, bought in Kashi for her son. Even today he wrapped himself in it to sleep. Jagannatha flipped through the pages of a notebook. One page was about Clive. "Manjunatha Prasanna" occupied all the blank spaces. Even today he could not deride his old habit of remembering Manjunatha whenever his left eyelid quivered[2] or his left leg tripped over something, or when he was about to receive his

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[1] a pen with a compass on the top with its needle pointing northwards.

[2] supposed to be a bad omen in men.

question paper from the supervisor. Only, the way he did it now was different. Finally, he found a deck of cards buried in a corner of the trunk. Dog-eared cards. Jagannatha shouted to Rao, "The cards here can't be shuffled. They are not very smooth. Very old." Rao said," It is all right. Bring them."

Rao dealt the cards. Adiga's stomach rumbled audibly. Jagannatha said, "You must be hungry."

"It is okay, I can wait for half an hour," Adiga replied.

Rao made a bid. Jagannatha raised it by one. Adiga said, "No."

Asked about the trump, Jagannatha said, "Diamond."

Rao asked, "Dip?" Jagannatha said, "Yes" took out the dip and frowned. He told Adiga it was his turn to play.

Then he asked him, "Adigare, what is your eldest son doing?"

"It is a long story. My wife didn't get along with my daughter-in-law. Arguments every day. My son doesn't like the idea of working as a priest. I told him to do whatever he liked. He is working in a hotel in Shimoga. My second daughter was married and lived in Sagar. But now, she is widowed and lives with us. She has three daughters. I have to get them married too. My wife and my daughter don't jell either. Somehow, life goes on."

Adiga sounded vexed. But, his face carried a smile. He played a diamond and said, "I too am not well these days. I can no longer travel as I used to."

It was Jagannatha who lost the game. Chikki asked them to come in and eat. They were the only three left to eat because the house priest, cook and his children had finished. And all the three were really hungry.

Adiga, relishing his rice and curry spoke of this and that and finally came to the topic of the day.

"Jaganna, is it true — what I heard?"

"Yes."

"Look here. You are a man of learning. One should not engage in such actions without ridding oneself completely of the ego because it involves the very future of this whole town."

Chikki, wanting to listen to this conversation, came in under the pretext of serving them some bondas,[1] a favourite dish of Adiga's. Chikki served generously. Jagannatha, feeling that anything but plain speech would be an insult to Adiga, said, "I know your argument, Adigare, aren't you saying only an ascetic has the authority to defy socio-cultural mores?"

Mixing curry with rice and eating it with the fried side dish, Adiga closed his eyes for a minute. Then he said very assertively, "Yes, to the ascetic, God-blessed food and the excreted food are the same. He is absolutely impartial. It appears Ramakrishna Paramahamsa found even his sacred thread to be an obstacle to spiritual freedom and got rid of it. He treated the beggar, who, with crows and dogs, combs discarded leftovers, as if he were his master. Only to such people do distinctions like untouchables, Brahmins etc., cease to exist."

These familiar arguments did not faze Jagannatha. However, respecting the intensity behind Adiga's statements, he searched for the right thing to say and said, "If what you say is true, it means that society has no meaning. Isn't that so? Meaning exists only when one transcends society." Rao was listening to Jagannatha intently. Chikki served jilebis. Adiga covered his leaf-plate with his hand to stop her from serving more. Chikki found corners on his leaf-plate not covered by his hand and served him two more, saying, "It's your favourite, isn't it?" This war between Chikki and Adiga over how many jilebis Adiga could manage perhaps prevented him from hearing Jagannatha. Adiga, enjoying this sweet dish though he had not wanted any more, said, "Jaganna, see here. I have this sacred thread. It is an insignia of my livelihood. Because I wear this, people invite me to be the presiding priest at ceremonies, to sing hymns from the *Samaveda*. You yourself have chosen me to conduct religious services at the Neelakanteshwara temple. However, if I surrender into God's hands, I will burn out like camphor. As long as I am attached to karma and remain a creature given to desire, I need all the customs and habits of this world. At the end, of course, nothing."

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[1] a fried savoury made of bengal gram, salt, chillies etc. fried in oil.

Adiga had tried to say something and come out with something else altogether. That was his usual method of communication. Words followed the fancies of his mind. Jagannatha tried sarcastic talk to draw Adiga's attention, because heartfelt words melted like jilebis in his mind,

"What do the Puranas[1] say?—Brahmarshi Vashishta[2] was the son of a devadasi[3] called Urvashi.[4] This Vashishta married an untouchable woman called Arundhathi, who later was transformed into a star. It is she who is invoked to bless the bride and the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony. Thus, you see, our religion has been revolutionary. Isn't that true?" Jagannatha was enraged to see Chikki and Adiga nod as if agreeing with him. He put it bluntly.

"That's what I call self-deception. There is no danger greater than ingenuity. See, what our religion has done to our country. Stagnant! How come society has remained the same for centuries in a country that boasts of so many revolutionary stories? These myths and beliefs ensure through buttery words that those at the top and those at the bottom remain where they are."

Subraya Adiga did not get angry. Rao who had almost finished his meal stared at Jagannatha as if to say that this discussion was useless, and waited. Adiga picked up one of the two extra jilebis that Chikki had insisted on serving. It was quite sometime since Jagannatha had finished his meal. These days, he was experimenting with living on a minimal diet. Adiga, unmindful of whether others had finished or not, broke his jilebi into pieces and put one into his mouth in a leisurely way and said, "This is all I want to say, Jagannatha. Do you have real love for the untouchables? If your love is genuine, then you will merge with the birds, beasts and untouchables and become an other-worldly ascetic. There will be no question of any conflict whatsoever. No need for a revolution either. You

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[1] ancient legends and tales of the gods.

[2] one of the most celebrated Vedic rishis; the author of several hymns of the Rig Veda. Rama's priest, in *Ramayana*.

[3] a temple dancer, 'devadasi' means servant of God.

[4] a dancer in the court of Lord Indra.

will live in a state of absorption. I am saying that neither you nor I have reached that stage."

Adiga had started speaking passionately. He picked up his jilebi and continued, "Twenty years ago, God used to call me from all sides and it is true that I did experience it at least for a few moments. Or maybe, my ego is making me speak this way. At any rate, I am not in that state now. I have become extremely short-tempered. Anger sits at the tip of my nose, ready to pounce. Once in a while, I even beat my wife. I get furious when my children cry. I don't feel like going home at all. I long to live a nomadic life. My appetites continue to rage. See here, in spite of knowing that it will hurt my stomach, I am relishing this sweet thing. You know why I say all this? Oh! I have forgotten what I wanted to say—we all live in Manjunatha's womb, good people, bad people, greedy ones like me, heroes like you, selfless, action-bound people like Rao, Chikki who longs to preserve the family tradition—all, all live in the womb of Manjunatha."

Jagannatha laughed when he heard Adiga's last sentence and felt that anything he said would be futile. Adiga had been carried away by his own words. However, some of Adiga's statements sounded perennially haunting. True, Adiga now was not the same Adiga he used to know. He had been vanquished. Somewhat enfeebled. Or, had he been like that even before? Jagannatha could not be sure. He told Chikki that he did not want any more rice. Rao said that whatever rice was left on his leaf-plate was enough for yogurt. Adiga wanted a little more rice. Jagannatha said, "Adigare, I have been looking for the possibilities inherent in social action. You know why? Because it has been possible for only those outside the social fabric to be revolutionaries. Within our social life..."

Adiga intervened.

"You too will be an ascetic. You will lose all desire. Wait and see. You will turn into an ascetic. If not, nothing happens here. What did Gandhi become finally? I know a story which I heard in Orissa. I will tell you later. Really very interesting."

Adiga mixed rice and yogurt, thinking of something amusing. Jagannatha thought that even a well-fed man would feel the pangs of hunger watching Adiga eat with such relish.

Chikki, standing by, ready to serve water from a copper container, asked, "What is it you want to say, Jaganna? That the saying, 'God, you worship; children, you nourish; citizens, you protect' is false?"

Seeing no connection between what he was saying and Chikki's remark, Jagannatha chose not to respond. Chikki however continued.

"You will be all right if you get married. If your mother were alive, there would have been no chance for the present occurence." She served water, went in and came back with some more vermicelli kheer[1]. She served it in banana leaf cups despite protests from all three. She complained, "Jagannatha doesn't even eat properly these days."

Rao, who had hitherto been silent, spoke,

"There is some truth in what Chikki says, Manjunatha's glory has grown because for hundreds of years, he has listened to all the intimate pains and pleasures of crores of people. Well, I cannot say for sure he has listened, but people have existed believing that he has, and does. It doesn't matter that I personally don't believe it." Jagannatha said, "When such a belief is destroyed..."

"Such a belief is absolutely essential as long as man remains man..."

"That means, when we mine copper, bring electricity to the town, buy an X-ray machine for the hospital, and gradually develop a scientific attitude, this belief will automatically..."

"It won't go, Jaganna. In Russia, they killed God but what happened? Stalin himself became God — didn't he?"

"Rao, this kind of argument is like a high school debate, that's all. It is tantamount to saying that because we are all going to die some day, it is useless for us to do anything at all.

The temperature began to rise. When the latter was just about to get up, Adiga started again.

"What I finally say is this — without intensity — living means death-in-life. When Paramahamsa touched Vivekananda[2] with

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[1] a sweet, creamy desert.

[2] a philosopher monk who was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa famous for his soul stirring speech at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago in 1983.

his feet, the latter felt that the ground under his feet was sinking. When we are in the hands of God, we burn, we shake to our roots. If we don't experience terror at least once in life, it is all a waste. True, terror strikes us at such a moment. Everything seems to detach itself from everything else. We horripilate. The thought that I am distinct has to vanish thus and that is really tough. A man named Govinda Guru told me this in Badarikashram, 'Adiga, I go so far and I feel frightened, even as I keep struggling, I find myself tossed on this shore.' If Jaganna has intensity now and if at least in his hate, Manjunsatha fills his mind, he is a lucky man. That's what I say. Acceptance or rejection of Manjunatha is not important. That terror, that struggle—Jagannatha will experience. And thus ego will have to be annihilated.

One is born a Shudra,
One's karma makes him a twice-born.
One's reading of the Vedas makes him a vipra.[1]
One's knowledge of the Brahman[2] *makes him a Brahmana.*[3]

They say this—you know why? At the most, we are dwijas[4], still in the second stage. Meditation, self-integration, and study, might have made Jagannatha a vipra, in the third stage. He is set on changing the relationship between the people and Manjunatha through collective action. He will understand everything during the process of change. To put it succinctly, something within him is struggling to liberate itself. Just as an embryo in a mother's womb kicks her, Jagannatha is kicking Manjunatha. You see, he is not a dead embryo. Let him kick. Manjunatha is sure to feel tickled all over by this kind of service. That's the truth."

Adiga with eyes closed, spoke in an intoxicated state. At the same time, he picked cashew-nuts and raisins from his dessert and ate them with relish. Some of his statements were those of moribund Brahmins. But some others shone with an intense fervour. Jagannatha, who was listening to Adiga with love and

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[1] wise man.
[2] ultimate reality, not to be confused with the Brahmin caste.
[3] he who attains ultimate knowledge is a Brahmin.
[4] twice born; once physically, the second time spiritually.

fear, waited for Adiga's fervour to melt away in a rush of facile words.

"Illusion—what is illusion? What is reality? People, who believe in Manjunatha, are living in an illusion. Jagannatha says he will rid them of it. He thinks they will wake up through suffering. Last night's dream appears as an illusion when one wakes in the morning. Today's reality seems to be an illusion in tomorrow's awareness. When one crosses over this awareness, experiences a vision... who is God, who is a twice-born, who is an untouchable...?"

Rao, trying to change the conversation, said, "Jagannatha, don't dismiss Chikki so lightly. A man with a wife and children understands the meaning of responsibility. If your planned action can be carried out while you are being responsible for a family, your action becomes meaningful. If you talk about revolution without knowing what it is to co-exist with a wife and bring up children, it is pointless. If you are not familiar with the pains and pleasures of family life, why should you rebel? And for whom? Look, what rotten people have come to power through Gandhi's revolution!"

Jagannatha felt that if the argument continued in this vein, it would turn into a game. He stood up. All three filed out to rinse their hands. Adiga washed and dried his hands, went out and waited. The agitation on his face had intensified. Jagannatha realized that Adiga was waiting for him. He came out looking forward to what Adiga had to say. Rao went upstairs to get his betel leaves and arecanuts. Jagannatha stood next to Adiga who stared back with moist eyes, trying to wordlessly convey all the joy within. Jagannatha remembered what Adiga had done while he was sitting on a stone facing the ruins of a Jain temple and was afraid.

Said Adiga, "Jaganna, you are a secret devotee."

Jagannatha laughed, thinking how ingenuous Adiga was. Adiga put his hand on Jagannatha's back in an informal way. His body, smeared with sandalwood paste touched Jagannatha's shirt. Adiga's arm encircled him as if he were about to embrace him. On his neck was the blotch. Eyes that shone as if he were

in a trance. Jagannatha, feeling embarrassed and disconcerted, tried to laugh and said, "Let's go upstairs."

Upstairs, eyes closed and looking tired. Rao was lying on a mat, spread on the ground. Adiga, chewing betel leaves and arecanuts, joyously began the story he had promised to tell.

"Yoga controls the wayward mind. A mendicant in Orissa told me this story which celebrates the power of concentration. I did not want to narrate this in Chikki's presence.

Once upon a time, there was an untouchable. His work was to clean the palace latrines. You know what palaces are! Lavatories with tall walls. One day, when this untouchable went to clean the place, the queen was relieving herself. When he bent forward, standing outside the lavatory, he was shocked to see the queen's genitals and anus. After this extraordinary event, he became obsessed with her body, day and night, because he had never seen those parts of a fair-skinned woman. He gave up eating, imagining the queen's naked body. He gave up drinking, sleeping, bathing. His face shrank, his eyes became sunken, his beard grew long and matted. The untouchable's wife got worried. Not knowing why her husband was weakening so, she nagged him to tell her. Begged him. One day, he told her what had happened. His wife thought about it a lot and decided that her husband's life was the most important thing. Her courage grew with her decision. Finally, one day, she somehow met the queen and told her about her husband. The queen was amused and she smiled. She said, "Fine, bring your husband. Tell him he can see my entire body naked." The untouchable came to the queen who stood naked before him. But what was surprising was that, having fantasized about it again and again, by the time he got to see the naked queen, he had become liberated from his oppression to see her so. He had become an ascetic. The queen saw the untouchable with his knotted beard. The untouchable saw the naked queen. He touched her hair and feet and prostrated before her. The queen touched his feet and prostrated before him. The

gist of all that I have been saying is in this story. Jaganna, you will gradually grasp the meaning of it," concluded Adiga.

THIRTEEN

After resting awhile, Adiga and Rao had their coffee and left. Chikki had bought enough banana-leaf plates and cups from Adiga to serve the hundreds of pilgrims expected on the New Moon Festival day. However, sorrowing over the possibility that no one would ever come to eat again at her house, she had pleaded with Adiga to advise Jagannatha. "Time will right everything," Adiga had said to her. She wrapped some jilebis in a banana leaf for him to take home.

After Adiga and Rao had left, Jagannatha, seated in a chair on the verandah, waited eagerly for the untouchables. He wondered whether they would touch him that evening. Why had he not given any thought to it till now? He had by his side new slates and soapstone pencils for his untouchable students who had hitherto been writing on sand. What letters of the alphabet were absolutely essential to them? What books were indispensable for them to read? He should make them read *Chomana Dudi*. Also, he should simplify some passages for them about the *Ramayana*[1], *Esur*[2], the French and Russian revolutions. He had already written a few pages about China's Cultural Revolution. He should read it to them tomorrow. He should not feel embarrassed to talk about anything to them. He should work with the firm conviction that the only reality was what was real to them. He should go on making what was real to him, real to them too. From the moment they advanced enough to touch him, things would gradually become real to them. Manjunatha would recede further and further. And things would begin to blossom. Jagannatha waited with eager expectation.

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[1] the story of Rama; one of the two great Indian epics.

[2] a tiny place in Karnataka where a fierce struggle against the British was organised.

He saw the untouchables at a distance. Red dust in knotted black hair. Black blanket over bare body. Just a loin cloth for cover. And a knife tucked in at the waist.

They stood outside the yard. He asked them to come in. They walked with fear and hesitation to the centre of the yard and came to a halt. They stood there awkwardly, legs twisted, backs bent as if their presence there that evening in the yard, was a crime. Jagannatha did not have the courage to ask them to sit on the verandah. There was possibly an element of coercion in the air which they might resent. He asked them to sit down, and they spread their blankets and sat on them. In order to ease the tension, Jagannatha threw arecanuts and tobacco towards them. One young man caught the packet and distributed the contents. Jagannatha asked them to chew their tobacco, and to make it easy for them, he himself started chewing arecanuts and applying chunam to betel leaves. He tried to create an ambience by which everything would appear natural and ordinary to the untouchables. But they simply would not apply chunam to their tobacco in his presence. They sat there frightened. Not knowing how to rid them of their reluctance, Jagannatha called out the first name that came to his mind, "Pilla."

One of them responded. Jagannatha, wanting to register firmly Pilla's identity in his mind, noticed how tall, powerful and dark he was. Profuse bunches of hair covered Pilla's head. A budding moustache on his face. Stubbly beard. A handsome muscular young man. Jagannatha decided to make Pilla their leader and asked him, "How's it that the other five haven't come?"

"Master, they have gone to Besthur."

"Come on, have some tobacco." Jagannatha waited, chewing. Perhaps there was some easing of tension. The untouchables put some arecanuts into their mouths and started rubbing tobacco with chunam. Jagannatha realized how absurd his intended talk to them was going to be. But he had no choice and so, he used the simplest words to tell them about his plan. The day after the New Moon Day was the Chariot Festival. He told them that they should walk with him on that day into the Manjunatha temple. The untouchables simply sat there. They

did not even ask why. In what direction were their minds flowing? How could he stop that flow and capture their minds with his words? He did not know. So, he himself tried to ask and answer the question why. The untouchables sat there impassively with tobacco in their mouths. He babbled on about Gandhi, Ambedkar, Negro slaves, but they simply sat there. Jagannatha discovered how absurd, how laughable the whole thing was.

Jagannatha changed the topic and said, "Hereafter, you should use slates to read and write." He wrote the word, "Basava" on a slate, and extending his hand from where he sat on the verandah, said "Pilla, take this." Pilla stood up. Jagannatha again invited him to take it. Pilla came a few steps towards the verandah and stood ready to catch, expecting Jagannatha to throw the slate.

Jagannatha stood up, and bending forward, extended his hand with the slate to reach Pilla's hands. Pilla suddenly lowered his hands. Jagannatha bent further and said, "Pilla, the slate will break if it falls down. Take it." Alert, Pilla's hands went further down. Jagannatha bent down some more. Pilla, unable to lower himself any more, sat down and put his open hands on the ground. Jagannatha felt that if he were to stretch any more, Pilla might try to go underground. He was disgusted with this game of stretching, bending and distancing and let go of the slate. Pilla caught it. Jagannatha asked him to read what he had written. Pilla, with the nerves on his neck turgid, struggled, staring at the slate for a while, and finally read "Basava." Jagannatha wrote "Kamala","Karaga", "Ramana", "Chapala" on the slates, and threw a slate to each one, and asked them to read. Two of them read with great difficulty, stammering. Two others did not.

Jagannatha explained again why they ought to enter the temple with him. Even though he felt that his utterances were turning into soliloquies, he blurted out everything that was on his mind. He then asked them to ask any questions they might have. Nobody spoke. Jagannatha said, "Pilla, ask me about something." If someone were to see him in this plight, he would feel utterly humiliated. This attempt at intimate talk with the untouchables made him feel like a thief.

Pilla, feeling shy and scratching his head, said, "My father told me that he needs fifty rupees to bring me a wife."

"Who is this woman?" Jagannatha tried thus to humour Pilla and make him smile. Another untouchable said laughing, "Pilla will have a wife for fifty rupees. And she will come here and work for you to pay off the debt."

An untouchable woman for Pilla, the untouchable young man! Who was she? Did Pilla love her? Untouchable boys who came of age pestered their parents to find wives for them. Jagannatha had gathered this from the tales of daily joy and grief that the old untouchable women used to tell Chikki.

Jagannatha told Pilla, "Ask our shanbhog tomorrow. I will tell him about what you need. Pilla, when is the wedding?"

They said it was still two months away. Pilla's face beamed happily as he was going to get the bride-money so effortlessly. There would not be the usual hassle he had to go through to get this kind of money from mother or Chikki. Jagannatha was not sure that his easygoing manner in dealing with their problems would make them understand him any better.

An effective measure to break down the barrier between him and them flashed across his mind after the untouchables had left. If they were all to wear a white dhoti and a white shirt, they might think it was all right to touch him. Jagannatha was excited at the idea. The very next day he would buy short white dhotis from Rao's shop and readymade half-sleeved shirts from Shyama's store for all the ten of them. He got up to go into the house. Kaveri came into the yard, carrying wood and driving the cattle. She gave him a sidelong glance and smiled shyly. Janardhana Shetty, who had probably asked Kaveri to appear before him, came up to him in a lively mood. He had read the news. He came close to Jagannatha like an intimate friend and said, "Why do you want to associate with the untouchables?" Jagannatha was angry at this deliberate insolence. So, he asked Shetty in an authoritative tone, "How is work going?" and went in without waiting for an answer. Inside, the servant was setting up the gas lights. Jagannatha told Chikki that he was not hungry because he had had a late lunch and went to his room and lay down. He tried to read whatever book was within reach. He felt like seeing Puranik again. However, he told himself that that would be a waste of time. Kaveri hovered outside his room, pretending to arrange his washed and dried

clothes. She noticed that the lantern light was not bright enough for Jagannatha to read, brought a gas light and placed it on the table. Jagannatha, breathing feverishly, tried to read without looking at Kaveri. He decided to tell Margaret in his letter that he was alienating himself from life even this way—curbing his sexual desire. He calmed down after Kaveri left.

Next morning, Jagannatha bought ten dhotis from Rao's shop and ten half-sleeved shirts from Shyama's store. Shanbhog Shastri, who was waiting for him to return, brought the ledger to him. Jagannatha, who had noticed Shastri's inexpressible discomfort since the day Rao's son, Ranganna, had been hired asked gently, "What is the matter?" Shastri said that the late scrivener Krishnaiah's son Gopala, had written from Mysore saying that he planned to come to Bharathipura for the festival and needed a hundred rupees. He wanted to know whether he should send the money. Jagannatha was angry at Shastri's meanness in this matter of sending money to Gopala, when Jagannatha's people looked upon him as a member of the family. He spoke sharply. "Send it. Why do you have to ask me?" "A fortnight ago, we sent a hundred and fifty rupees to him, that is why," said Shastri, smiling teasingly. Jagannatha answered curtly, "It is all right. Send the money," and picked up the book he was reading.

The postman arrived; Jagannatha found a letter from Margaret among the ones he received, and opening it eagerly, began to read. She had written a brief loving letter in a hurry. *You are an unreliable rogue. Why haven't you written to me for so many days? Right now, we have election fever in England. I hope the Labour Party loses. Look, how democracy has become a lie. There is no real choice between the two major parties in England. Wilson and Heath are really Tweedledum and Tweedledee.* She had scribbled these things and gone on to say, *I would like to come to India. It appears that there is an International School near Bangalore, run according to J. Krishnamurthy's philosophy*[1]*. I could teach English*

[1] Jiddu Krishnamurthy (1895—1986) philosopher and writer who believed that each individual can solve his or her problems by a process of self-understanding that goes beyond intellectual speculation, adherence to a belief, or learning from a guru.

and History there. I have written to the Principal. Father knows him. Please find out and write to me. She had ended the letter with an expression of intense, intimate love. *I want you when it is cold here. I remember the nice warmth of your body...* By using the dots, she had kindled in Jagannatha intimate memories of their love making. She had concluded by joking about Jagannatha's attractiveness. *Beware! How many girls are you trying to seduce with your soulful eyes!*

Jagannatha wrote her a reply immediately. He felt completely unburdened. He wrote about his planned action and promised to go to Bangalore in a week to see that her job was fixed. He mailed the letter himself, came back and sat down to write a short history of revolutions in simple Kannada for the benefit of the untouchables. Chikki must have felt sad that at lunch time there were no guests other than members of the household staff. The house priest Ganapathi Bhatta sitting next to Jagannatha for lunch would not even glance at him until it was over, because he ate without performing any of the rituals—circling the banana leaf-plate with water, setting aside the daily rice offering to the deities and ceremonial sipping of a spoonful of water before and after the meal. Bhatta used to eat with his left palm pressed to the floor, drink water in slurps, and eat his food with eyes closed in a state of supreme satisfaction. Besides him, there were two of his growing sons. Hair on the head shorn to look like the half-moon. Big tufts. They would not speak during the meal because they had undergone their sacred thread ceremony only recently. The server used to make fun of them and try to distract them from their sworn silence by asking them questions like, "Shall I bring more curry?" "Shall I serve you buttermilk?" "Why, don't you like it?" There was another child of four or five who had not yet had his sacred-thread ceremony. This child was so scared of his father that he would fall silent if he sensed his father's presence anywhere nearby.

Jagannatha was aware that these young people, having had to live in a rich man's house, were growing up so timid that they dared not breathe freely. But there was little he could do about that.

He ran into Chikki while he was on his way to his room. He was vexed to see her. There was in her face a sadness that could break all his courage. To appease her, he said, "Gopala has written that he will be here for the Festival," and went up the stairs. Meanwhile, Rao came running with a newspaper in hand.

"Jagannatha, you have become news!" said Rao and gave Jagannatha a copy of *Jagruti* a daily newspaper, published in Shimoga. Jagannatha was annoyed because he knew that, to Rao, a politician by nature, becoming news was a big thing. *Jagruti*, had highlighted Jagannatha's wealth and praised his revolutionary concern. Rao said, "The present editor of *Jagruti* has changed parties three to four times." And then he added enthusiastically, "Tomorrow, there will be letters to the editor about this in the Bangalore newspapers." He sat down reading.

Jagannatha noted that even though Rao was not enthused about his intended step, he was concerned about him. Did we not love those whom we changed? Rao loved Jagannatha because he was instrumental in changing him. Jagannatha loved Margaret even now for the same reason. He had changed her. Only that which we have changed truly become ours.

Jagannatha was not a political animal by nature. This, Rao knew. Therefore, he did not want Jagannatha to be involved in politics.

Rao sat there silently for a long time. Jagannatha kept writing. He felt grateful that it was possible for him to sit with Rao without having to converse with him. To be together in silence was in itself satisfying to both of them. This sort of relationship was rare, possible with only a very few. However, at times such togetherness had not been possible even with Margaret. They had either to provoke each other or engage in love-making.

After Rao left, Prabhu came. He sat down leisurely and lit a cheap cigarette. He said that Jagannatha should contest the next election and not allow the Vokkaliga[1] community to field a party-endorsed candidate. Jagannatha yawned to indicate that he wanted silence. Prabhu found out from Chikki, who served coffee, how thick the rope she needed had to be. He promised to get it from Shimoga. He waited until he felt

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[1] a community of farmers.

Jagannatha had cheered up and then said, "Let's go to Bangalore and meet the minister. We will file an application for the electrification of Bharathipura." After a pause, he continued, "Rayare, you have stood up for the untouchables. It's all well and good, but do you think they will be grateful to you? They will as usual vote for the party in power the next time round." He stood up. And before he left, he said, "Rayare, talking to scholars like you is so profitable. Next time, I'll bring my son with me. You tell me whether he has the aptitude to be an engineer or study for the Indian Administrative Exams."

He saluted Jagannatha and left. Jagannatha started writing again. He wanted to write exactly what was happening in his mind. He took out a new note book.

I have not from the beginning thought about human limits. Human possibilities have been my concern. Thoughts come in spurts. And reality leaves me dissatisfied. My problem is this: I have played comfortable intellectual ball games with Margaret or with Peter, Tom, Reubens, sunbathing in Hyde Park or sipping draft beer at the Union Bar. I was always under the illusion that I was a free man because I could discuss anything under the sun with my friends. That time when I could think anything I wanted, fly anywhere mentally, feeling unbound, my face turning red with enthusiasm proved to be unreal. Our ideas should tussle with reality for us to gauge their worth. That means the extent to which the untouchables get ready to stand up for their rights will determine the degree of reality in my thinking. The self in me very much needs to take this test.

For people from my class, Margaret, it is possible to be under the illusion that all that we think is real. But, from the moment I realized that the slavery of the untouchables diminished the possibilities of my own humanity, I have been seeking authentic freedom.

Gandhi, who still kicks in the womb of God, is more real than a free thinker like M.N. Roy. It is more meaningful to wrestle with a scoundrel like Prabhu who shapes the actuality around us for his benefit than to play intellectual ball games with Puranik.

For instance, Dikshit of the Communist party. Once, in Bangalore, when I argued with him, I felt perturbed. Smoking a cigarette, he had argued in English. He, who knows no Indian language well enough,

finds Gandhi a fraud. Dikshit with his torn shirt and baggy trousers is lost in an involvement of his own. I told him: your party people do not know the oppressed Indians at all. Gandhi knows them and this soil. The wand needed to churn the environment here has to be rough and tough. It is not enough for a thinking man to be like an aerial that catches sound waves. He has also to be, in mind and body, a rough churning wand that possesses certain acknowledged qualities of the environment. No one who refuses to recognize the pull of Hinduism in himself can think real thoughts here. Dikshit agreed with me, but said that the economic system had to change first.

Isn't there a connection between a devotee of Kali[1] *in Bengal and a militant communist? I argued with him along these lines for a long time. Finally, he simply said, "Right now, my problem is wages," smiled and walked away.*

That the emancipation I can achieve on my own within me is pointless is what makes me restless. Personal salvation may just mean Adiga's illusion of deliverance from everything. Or it may mean to transform one's room upstairs into a little England. Or, become a so-called realist who says that we must blossom within the perimeters of the petals. But aren't there musicians who can at any time make any moment blossom amazingly? Why court the torture of change? Change, a phenomenon that pierces, bores and ignites. The way of a fully blown flower which receives the dew-drops and shines through its contact with sunlight—that is entirely different from effecting change. But, how can I forget the way Nagamani put herself out? It is not as if I have not experienced that bliss of natural emancipation: the leisurely pliancy that lies in the elaboration of notes in Indian classical music.

The time when Jagannatha used to lie down naked with Margaret in winter. The mystery of winding, clasping petals that pulled inward like a conch in the exploding invitation of the female. The gentle lightness of the flower at the end of a firm stalk. A rose that played hide and seek. Margaret's breath on his neck, adding to the heat, nestling closer and closer, pressing her body into his. The moment when he, brushing her hair back from her cheeks, became liberated. Like the Indian

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[1] a popular deity in Bengal. Kāli is a name of Devi, (the consort of Shiva) who has two aspects. One benign and other fierce; and Kāli is a representation of her fierce side.

classical musical elaboration that rises a little, falls a little, the joy of expanding just enough, without stinginess or haste. A sexual act that could for ever hold back the eagerness to reach the peak. Such fulfilment was possible once in a rare while.

Even though all that was real, why did Margaret reject me? Why did I find her inadequate? Why did I feel that I should become real through these untouchables who do not sow or grow anything in this soil, who are simply born here and die here? Why did I find both Adiga's spirituality and Margaret's sexuality inadequate?"

Jagannatha read what he had written. He felt dissatisfied. Probably he could have written the same thing six months earlier. He felt he could not concretize all that was inside him and look at it squarely. He was still an idle idealist. Still planning the game of now expanding, now contracting in front of a mirror.

He went to the farm, needing a walk before the untouchables came. These days he pretended to be interested in his estate — that was all. Otherwise, he would appear false and abnormal in this environment. "How are you, Sheenappa? Settare, what is happening?" Repeating these cliches, he barely survived. But the behaviour of every one of these men had changed after the news of his plan reached them. He noticed that it was painful for them to see the town's principal landlord demeaning himself by joining the untouchables. It seemed that they were content and even happy to see Jagannatha retain his position of pre-eminence so that they could remain subservient to him. It was ironic that the degree to which he could be heartless determined the value they attached to his kindness. Only through radical action could he make them see the new man in him. Or else, they would wait for him to gradually fit the image of a rich man with a long moustache.

He stood under a mango tree. A profusion of flowers this season. Probably Chikki had already planned to prepare two years supply of mango pickles. May be, that was why she had asked Shastri to bring six large glass jars from Shimoga. Ants on the barks of the tree. Red ones that the untouchables fried and ate. Nights, they would set up a fire to heat their bath water. There

were a hundred secret by-ways to happiness. But, his search was for something else. He came to the yard full of tension.

He saw the untouchables coming some distance away. They were walking reluctantly as if they were coming to perform some unpleasant duty. Perhaps Pilla was not aware of his good looks. He decided not to tell them anything about his project. Asking them to wait, he went indoors to bring the new dhotis and shirts and soap to wash them with. Only six had come. But, he did not complain because he had not made their coming mandatory and gave each of the six a dhoti, a shirt and a piece of soap. They were just like the clothes he wore. They had to look like members of his own class —pockets, collars, half-sleeves, dhotis with borders. He said, "Wear the shirts. Let's see how you look." Some shirts were tight, others loose. When he asked them to wrap the dhotis around themselves, they hesitated. They wore them only under duress. Probably, they had never worn dhotis which reached down to the ankle. They felt awkward, took them off, folded them neatly and tucked them under their arms. Jagannatha told Pilla, "Tomorrow at the same time, soon after work, bathe and wear these clothes. Don't feel shy. Ask others to come too. I have dhotis and shirts for them too."

Pilla stood scratching his head. Jagannatha remembered. "Is it all right if you get the money just before the wedding? There are still two months left. What's the hurry?" said Jagannatha. He then gave them each some chewing tobacco.

Next day, Sripathi Rao brought a few of the newspapers published in Bangalore. He read aloud all the letters about Jagannatha printed in the readers' column.

Jagannatha found opinions about him that were favourable and unfavourable. But, neither praise nor censure touched him as he had succeeded in laying bare his mind to the untouchables. A letter that attacked his position stated that his deliberate move to hurt the feelings of upper caste people was far from Gandhi's philosophy. Another had analyzed in big words the difference between a believer, full of love for the untouchables, wanting them to enter the temple and a westernised atheist's intent to destroy Hinduism. Communist Dikshit had issued a statement saying that this projected action born of the idealism of a

member of the landed gentry was bound to fail, and that only through an economic revolution could casteism be destroyed. However, Dikshit had added that he was going to support Jagannatha. Magadi Ananthakrishna, the organizer of the Sarvodaya Movement[1] had appealed to everyone to co-operate with Jagannatha in an action that was dear to Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobaji[2]. He stressed the need for non-violence and argued in a persuasive way that the glory of Manjunatha would be enhanced by the entry of the untouchables into the temple.

"Do you know who this Ananthakrishna is?" Sripathi Rao began to tell the story of Ananthakrishna. Ananthakrishna was one of Rao's orator companions in the freedom struggle. Disgusted by the casteism of the Chitradurga Congress leaders, he was not nominated by the Congress Party to run for an assembly seat. An intelligent, friendly man he had responded to Jayaprakash Narayan's[3] call, forsaking his family to join the freedom campaign. An idealist. Though attracted to the good things of life and a decent man, he used to drink. "He might have given it up," Rao spoke freely now.

"Do you know how many tricks he plays to stay away from his wife? Just like me! But, very clever, very clever. What a speaker! I still remember the speeches he made during the 'Quit India' movement. He could have been a man of means. But, he lost everything in the national struggle. Later, he got embroiled in the Congress party in-fighting and became corrupted. Got declassed. Exasperated, he joined the Sarvodaya Movement. You know, he too is a dreamer? However degraded they may become, I love such people." Rao's eyes were shining with warmth. Jagannatha felt deep respect for Rao who could think so maturely about some things.

After Rao had left, Jagannatha took out a new note book to write. Afternoon hymns to his family deity and to the black

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[1] the literal meaning of the word is "compassion for all people". This movement is aimed at promoting cultural harmony, leading to socio-economic revolutions through non-violence.

[2] Acharya Vinoba Bhave: social worker and philosopher; a disciple of Gandhi. Founder of the Sarvodaya and the Bhoodan (land-gift) movements.

[3] a devoted Sarvodaya leader, a follower of Gandhi and socialist thinker. One of the founders of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934.

stone, dear to Lord Narasimha[1], the boom of the gong—all these sounds upset Jagannatha. As soon as this worship ended, the big bell of the temple would toll to signal the grand final service of the day to Manjunatha. Jagannatha felt he had become a spectre in his own town. He started writing in the notebook:

Worship takes place in my house too, everyday. Manjunatha has pervaded every place. The human fist cannot grasp Him. The crown of my boyhood is on Manjunatha's head. How many days have I spent calmly, sitting on the steps with my mother outside the temple, after worship. Monkeys used to snatch away the prasada of bananas from my hands. Time moves slowly here, paying homage to God with various ceremonies of the lunar calender—Balipadya[2], Akshatadige[3], Ganeshachowthi[4], Utthanadwadasi[5], Mahalaya Amavasye[6], ringing small and big bells, circling the diurnal events of birth, intercourse and death, year after year. That the untouchables may smite Time out of his slumberous state is my fervent hope. But the untouchables come like shadows. My thought is still like a spectre because they have not yet acquired any selfhood.

In the evening, he came out to the yard and waited. Chikki was watching the cattle coming home. Jagannatha had found out that since his decision became public, she was eating just one meal a day. He could not take this silent warfare. It was impossible to win her over with any kind of dialogue. Silence was her weapon. Jagannatha became angry with her and felt that all the sterility of their lives had solidified in that silence.

Only after they drew near did Jagannatha realize that they had not really hitched up their dhotis and tucked them in. They had cut them lengthwise and made loin clothes from the cut-out pieces... Jagannatha swallowed his anger. They looked ridiculous. They had folded their shirt collars inwards for they

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[1] half-man, half-lion. Lord Vishnu in his fourth avatar.
[2] a yearly feast in memory of Vishnu's humbling of King Bali.
[3] the third day in a lunar fortnight, on which the demon Aksha was slain.
[4] the fourth day in the lunar fortnight when Ganesha, the elephant-faced god's birthday is celebrated.
[5] a Vaishnava feast on the twelfth day in the light half of the month Kārthīka.
[6] the rites performed to the moon in the latter half of the Bhādra month.

had never worn open collar shirts. Wrong buttons and wrong holes. They stood like apparitions and in dread, ashamed of their new attire.

Jagannatha, staring angrily at Pilla, asked all of them,

"What did you do to the dhotis?" Listening to their answers brought a smile to his face. They had had to share their dhotis with father, uncle, elder and younger brothers and visiting relatives. So, they had cut them in half and used one half to get loin cloths made for them. Because people at home had ruled that half a dhoti was enough, they had had no choice. Jagannatha told them, "Convert these halves also into loin cloths. I will buy new ones for you. You should wear them whole to reach your feet. You should walk like me in the market place without fear or shame. Remember—you are the ones who will enter the temple with me. You belong to a new generation. Your task is to awaken others from their superstitions."

Jagannatha felt shame for the untouchables who stood there blinking, unable to understand many of the words he had used. Feeling useless and depressed, he went into the house. He had to strengthen himself even more. But how? He thought about it all night. To sow, to harvest, to wait for the rain,—these seemed to be the only things he could do. He got up in a state of stupor and in despair, walked round the cashew hill before returning home. He felt he could hear Chikki's sighs everywhere in the house.

Chikki hurt him unconsciously. In the way she served him coffee, in the way she neglected her hair, starved herself presenting a drawn face, and much more through her painful silence at not having any guests at home; a silence that searched Jagannatha's eyes to counter them.

Sripathi Rao came with the mail. At times like this, Jagannatha lost a little of his respect for Rao because he took such a keen interest in the news about his planned action, even though he was not whole heartedly with Jagannatha.

"Jaganna, see, Gurappa Gowda has not issued any kind of statement. Scoundrel! He cannot say openly, no untouchables in the temple.

"After all, he is a Congressman. He cannot also say, let the untouchables in, because he will then lose his upper caste votes.

Whatever you say, Jaganna, only Brahmins in this country are capable of getting ready for fundamental action, not Shudras. That is because the present arrangement benefits them enough. Now, more or less, the Lingayats[1] and Gowdas[2] share the available jobs. Even when the British were here, these people belonged to the Justice Party. You know the joke in all this? These Shudras are now becoming neo-Brahmins. It appears that once Bishte Gowda, the Revenue Minister had come to Gurappa Gowda's house to eat. Gurappa Gowda had a biryani[3] feast. After that, there was curd rice[4]. As curd rice is a Brahmin dish, it seems, Bishte Gowda washed his biryani-fed mouth first and then ate curd rice. Though all kinds of food that we eat eventually get mixed in the stomach, the Shudra dishes should not sully Brahmin dishes in the mouth! These are the kinds of people..."

Again, Rao had intended to say something and ended up saying something else. Jagannatha was depressed that Rao's awareness of actuality was turning him into a cynic. Instead of feeling upset over unacceptable Shudra behaviour, Rao was gloating over their weakness. He was sad at this craftiness in Brahmin consciousness which made the Brahmin an outsider. To change the topic, he said, "Rayare, what's in the papers?" Rao opened a paper and read a statement by Neelakantaswamy of the Mysore Socialist Party. Then, he commented.

"Don't believe him. He quarrelled over having a Brahmin Secretary for the Socialist Party and started his own Party, which he calls M.S.P., Mysore Socialist Party. A Lingayat. He may join the Congress Party any day. You can't trust him. He has a companion called Ranga Rao. It's a Brahmin name, but he is actually a Gowda.

"It seems he is an out and out Brahmin-hater. Our Sarvodaya Ananthakrishna knows all these people. By the way, he has written a letter and promises to come here to join you. Overall,

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[1] community of Shiva worshippers, followers of Basavanna, a social reformer and mystic who moved away from vedic priestly traditions. (12th century)

[2] literally,farmer,this is a term used for any affluent villager.

[3] spiced rice and meat like a pilaf/pulav.

[4] cooked rice mixed with yoghurt.

what you have done is to provide a platform for the politicians who were idling without a single issue."

Rao smiled as he said that. Jagannatha was a little worried that his purpose might get diluted by people like the ones Rao described. He had to fight now to make sure that his action remained unsullied. Concluding that he should not worry about such things, he waited for the untouchables. In the evening, ten untouchable youths came walking awkwardly and wearing new clothes like the ones he owned. They would not sit in the yard for fear of soiling their clothes. And they would not dare to sit on the verandah. They stood in the yard as if they were carrying a huge load of guilt. Jagannatha found it very difficult to talk or read to them as they stood so. He said all kinds of things pacing around them. Not hearing anything, they continued to stand and stare. He described an incident that had happened in Mandya, "You see, the mistake of the untouchable in Mandya was an ordinary one. Anyone could have made it. But, as he happened to be an untouchable, his act appeared to be horrendous to the caste Hindus. It appears that they strung him up on a tree and chopped off his fingers. Actually, you untouchables are in the majority in the nation. If you stand up, everything will change. You should come with me into the Manjunatha temple. It is famed throughout the country as a powerful and authentic deity. In our upper caste eyes, you are not yet human beings. Indeed, you are worse than sheep and bullocks. Therefore, if you get really indignant, you will begin to appear human to us."

However simple and straight he tried to be, they did not seem to have comprehended anything.

Jagannatha saw very vividly the harsh realities he and the untouchables had to face, while they stood as if they were nothing, as if they were not there, even though physically present, as if they did not deserve to be present anywhere and were afraid to be seen by anyone in their new white clothes.

An idea flashed across Jagannatha's mind. This experiment would not succeed without some cruelty. They would not wake up unless they were assaulted. But could he, a polite liberal, mount this assault?

Jagannatha sent the untouchables home, went to his room and lay down. Watching the darkening hills and trees outside, he felt nauseated by his weakness. Why could he not shed all the scales and see clearly both what was inside and outside? He sat down at the table and wrote:

I may feel like touching the untouchables in my lofty state of idealism. But they may like to touch me out of spite. If that were so, I should not hesitate to create jealousy and greed in them. Doesn't Engels say the reason for history's march is the evil passion of men? If it is necessary to be cruel to come out of Manjunatha's womb, I should be ready for it. Until they lose their innocence, the untouchables won't rebel. Probably, jealousy, greed and fiery tempers are necessary for that. To wake them up, one may have to pinch and brand them in places where it hurts most.

The untouchables too should desire what we want. An untouchable young man should be able to desire a Brahmin girl. A Brahmin girl should want to sleep with an untouchable.

Without desire, they will not learn to read and write. From desire, pain. From pain, consciousness.

Now, they are mere spectres. Just shadows which are not supposed to cross our path. Even Shankara, who said that man was manifest divinity, did not condemn untouchability. The reason? The untouchables did not stretch out their hands, did not seethe with desire, boil over and become human.

They have no right to a good name; no right even to commit mistakes. The only way they have in this land to transcend their wretched state is bhakti[1]*. The only freedom they enjoy in this land of the humble is to become the humblest. Their only right in this context for the status of the humblest is to win it and become alwars.*[2]

What a fraud this country has perpetrated by declaring that only the humblest ascetic can break all the social mores, rules and conventions! The untouchable has the greater chance than the Brahmin to become the lowliest before God. We are indeed the clever ones who gave the

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[1] devotion, faith; early Indian religion was characterized by a formal, sacrificial cult presided over by a priest. However a more personal devotional cult began to emerge, particularly in South India. Bhakthi denotes both the worshipper's intense love for God and God's love for his devotees.

[2] a Tamil word meaning immersed in devotion to God. There were twelve such alwars or saints.

untouchables the dream that those who carry shit on their heads in this life will be reborn as sacred tulsi leaves and reach God's feet!

A society that says that only through sacrifice, through wretchedness, through the renunciation of the ego... loses all meaning in daily life.

Even the revolutionary who wants daily life to blossom, will have to alienate himself from it the same way.

This much is definitely true: There should be a birth of new desire in our untouchables, a birth of jealousy. Perhaps only then will the embryo in the womb of God develop eyes, ears, nose and fingernails!

After eating some curd rice, and walking in the yard, Jagannatha returned to his room. Watching glow-worms outside in the bamboo bushes, Jagannatha fell asleep.

Fourteen

Jagannatha got up the next morning, washed his face, had his coffee and in high spirits went up to the top of the cashew-hill for a stroll. The sunlight had broken through the dew-cover on spiders' webs, to fall on the green grass. The gopuram[1] of the temple sparkled like a jewel in the sunlight. He remembered every sentence from Margaret's letter. Right now, he did not feel disturbed in spite of knowing how important his desire to celebrate things was, to his personality. Jagannatha was Jagannatha. What could he possibly do about it? He went in search of kake fruits, When he was a boy, the kake and dasawala[2] fruits of this hill were very dear to him.

He had come to a decision, but what it was, was not yet entirely clear to him. After breakfast, he wrote for some time and then left for the market place. He did not feel any discomfort about people looking at him with hostility and fear. He talked enthusiastically to Venkatakrishnaraya who appeared as usual with his unkempt hair and ash-smeared forehead. This Venkatakrishnaraya had a rigid routine morning

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[1] the cupola of a temple.

[2] the fruit of a creeper.

to afternoon—a cold water bath at four in the morning, two hours of worship at home, then, bathing the cows, and applying vermilion on their foreheads, next he worshipped them, gave them their morning meal, milked them, and finally spent the rest of the time until lunch reciting holy verses at the temple, his eyes closed. At least twice a week, he would not eat until he had seen a garuda[1] as he stood under the peepal tree If one asked this devout Brahmin, "Why all this rigorous routine?" he would answer in all seriousness. "At least, in my next birth, I would like to be born in America."

Jagannatha asked him this morning, "Why are you still at home?" He said, "Well, my wife has her monthly period and cannot enter the kitchen so I am the cook."[2] Perhaps he hated Jagannatha but he never showed it. Jagannatha met Vasu at the town square. Deeply concerned Vasu advised Jagannatha, "Why do you want to antagonize people by hobnobbing with the untouchables?" Suddenly, he switched to the deferential plural in addressing Jagannatha and said, "You educated folks, rich guys, you can somehow cope with all that social censure. Anyway, my attempt to open a shop has come to a halt. I may have to come to you for a loan." He left abruptly. Jagannatha did not have the courage to enter Jois' house as he passed by it. A house of mourning. It seemed so desolate! He went to see Sripathi Rao. Rao was writing an application for someone. Poor Rao! Always the same fate—free service to all comers!

He told himself that one day soon he should give the bottle of Chivas Regal, which he had brought from England, to Puranik. Of course, it would have been nicer if he knew Puranik's birthday. He ran into Ganesha, the chief priest's son, walking along, a medicine bottle in hand. He thought Ganesha had a curious face. A boy's body but an old face with sunken eyes. Mouth shut as if sealed. Jagannatha smiled at him as he stood staring at Jagannatha. He was surprised to see Ganesha trying very hard to say something. He too stood there and felt sorry that Ganesha was stammering, and waited patiently for

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[1] an eagle; vehicle of Lord Vishnu.

[2] a woman is considered unclean during this time, she cannot do the normal household duties and has to stay apart from the rest of the household.

him to get whatever he wanted to say out of his mouth. As if the whole thing was natural, Ganesha, his face contorted, asked, "Do you haveSharat Chandra's[1] novels?" Jagannatha replied affectionately, "Yes, you may come any time and borrow them." He left soon after saying that in order to avoid further embarrassment to Ganesha.

He ate lunch with the house priest and the cook's children. He was frustrated in his attempts to talk to Chikki. He rinsed his fingers and just before he returned to his room, stood in front of the room that housed his family deity from where the smell of fresh tulsi leaves emanated and thought for a minute. His decision grew firmer. However, not wishing to make it clear to himself just then, he thought it was better to sleep for half an hour. He tried to pacify his seething mind, lying in bed, because he needed all the intensity and power he could muster for the evening. Thinking of sundry light-hearted things, he smiled to himself. Once, at a dance organized by West Indians, Margaret had dragged him to the dance floor as soon as the music started, to tease him. Not knowing how to move in rhythmic steps, and perspiring, how dumb he had felt! He remembered Margaret's laughter at his predicament. She had also tried her damnedest to make him relax so that his rigid body would harmonize with the music, whispering, "Jagan, relax, relax." But she had failed miserably. In the midst of so many blacks dancing in total abandon, he had stood there like an idiot with his arm encircling Margaret's waist. Furious, she had blasted him, "You are an idiot without any sense of life's musical and dance possibilities." Drunk as he was, he had not been able to relax fully.

He got up abruptly and took out the bottle of Chivas Regal from the case and wrapped it in a piece of paper. Combing his hair, he drove the rarely used car out of the garage and set off towards Puranik's house. The car route to Puranik's house was circuitous and full of potholes and puddles. Somehow he reached Puranik's house, which was like an island. Jagannatha had to ring the bell twice, whisky in hand, before the Gurkha came to open the gate as usual. The Gurkha

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[1] a modern Bengali novelist.

saluted him, seated him in the hall, got Jagannatha to write his name on a slip of paper, put it on a plate and went in. Puranik came down, wearing slippers and an old but well made silk gown. He shook Jagannatha's hand and said, "Excuse me, I am not dressed." Jagannatha told him, "It is all right. Pardon me for coming without notice," Puranik said, "Not at all. You must feel free to drop in at any time." He took Jagannatha upstairs.

Jagannatha took note of Puranik's civility in welcoming him without asking any questions. He said, "I really have work to do, but I thought I would drop in for five minutes," and shyly gave Puranik the whisky. "No, you mustn't give this to me. This is liquid velvet." So saying, Puranik took the bottle with a flourish and thanked Jagannatha. "Let us celebrate this meeting, I will fix you a drink," Puranik added. Jagannatha excused himself by saying, "I have eaten just now. So, no thanks," Puranik insisted, "Then, some liqueur. It is the right thing for you," and poured some into a lovely slim glass. He poured some for himself and said, "Cheers!"

"The Labour Party appears to be winning the election this time too. The prediction of *The Daily Herald* has failed." Puranik started with this comment. A faded photograph placed on the radio came into Jagannatha's view. He had not noticed it the last time. He got up, and looking at it with interest, remarked, "If Labour comes to power, they behave like Conservatives. And if Conservatives get in, they follow leftist policies in several areas. English politics is strange." Puranik noticed Jagannatha's interest in the photo and said, "That was many decades ago, when I got married."

It was a curious photo. Puranik's wife was standing by him. He was in a turban, coat and dhoti, one end of which was pulled up between his legs and tucked in at the back. His wife was wearing a saree that covered her fully. Hair parted down the middle, she nestled close to her husband. What attracted Jagannatha most about the Puranik's buttoned black coat were its huge collars. Most important of all; that which distilled for Jagannatha the essence of the new-age outlook behind the revolutionary marriage was the absence of the things such wedding photographs usually had—garlands and crowns. And the

presence, instead, of books in the hands of the Puraniks. Both husband and wife, like graduates on their convocation day, stood erect, clutching books to their bosoms. Their eyes clearly showed the belief that they with their books were distinct from others. The photograph had below it their names and the legend that it had been taken on the occassion of the remarriage of a virgin child-widow.

Puranik asked Jagannatha who was lost in looking at the minute details of the photograph. "Have you succeeded in shocking the medieval citizens of our town?"

Jagannatha replied with a smile, "Well, an attempt is being made at any rate." He put his glass down, shook Puranik's hand and said, "I'll come again. I have to leave now. Please excuse me." Puranik replied "Thanks for the wonderful whisky. Nothing else could have pleased me more," he shook Jagannatha's hand and picked up his pipe. He accompanied him to the gate, and saying, "Come again," bade him goodbye.

Jagannatha returned home happy. But the thought of what he had to do troubled him. He was surprised at his own behaviour in abruptly getting up and going to see Puranik.

Jagannatha, who was waiting eagerly and with trepidation for the evening to come, saw the untouchables standing outside the yard. As he came down the stairs, his legs grew weak, his palms felt damp. They were standing beyond the yard boundary, expecting nothing! He came to the verandah, said "Wait," and went in. They would listen to whatever he said. They were standing there now in full length dhotis, guilty as criminals. Jagannatha felt distressed. They should be whipped. That might wake them. They might come into the world of deceit, fraud and greed and extend their hands. They might want things. They might learn.

His resolve deepened. Jagannatha stood in front of the puja room. A dark room with shining brass lamps. In a casket, the shaligrama[1] of the household deity, Narasimha. If it were to be polluted in any way, a black cobra would come into the house,

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[1] ammonite fossil stones recovered from the Gandaki river bed (Nepal) and regarded as exceedingly precious and sacred because Lord Vishnu is said to be present in them. Households and temples treasure these stones and worship them daily.

the farm would burn down — that was what they all believed. The shaligrama of a thousand years. For generations, the members of this family had eaten only after drinking water made holy from being poured on this stone symbol of Narasimha.

The house priest, having had his second bath, poured oil into the ever-burning lamp in the puja room. This wick lamp that burned day and night had a smell of its own. Sandalwood, tulsi leaves withered by the evening, conch flowers, roses, red sampige[1] , oil — everything mixed with the smell of scented sticks and exuded a sort of sweet aroma. The pointed tongue of the flame that kept spreading from wick to wick. The sacred thread ceremony in front of this eternal flame. Wedding ceremony in front of the fire lit from this flame. Chikki believed that this flame had been burning there for a thousand years. Light eternal!

Jagannatha laughed at times at the conception of eternity here. Chikki believed that the *same* buttermilk, mixed with milk, produced curds day after day — today's buttermilk plus milk created tomorrow's curds, which, in turn, produced buttermilk, and this buttermilk mixed with milk again made curds and on and on in an endless process. That was why Chikki made fresh curds once a year by mixing Swathi[2]rain water with milk. But this lamp had been burning for centuries providing fire for the family!

This fire had been preserved after all by salaried priests. Was it not possible that some house priest had forgotten to pour oil in the lamp someday thus snuffing out the flame? Might he not have lit the flame again, striking a match, before anyone could discover it? — But belief died hard: the lamp of the family clan, the lamp that had been burning for a thousand years, the lamp that the forefathers of the family had lit, etc. Should he go in to get the Narasimha shaligrama right in front of the priest? Should he enter with his shirt on, defying tradition? Should he get the shaligrama with the casket? Jagannatha's heart began to beat faster. His feet began to perspire. Thinking that there was no going back, he went in. Bhatta was horrified to see

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[1] flowers used for puja.

[2] rain that falls when the sun is in Swāthi, an auspicious constellation.

the master entering in an unclean state It was necessary for Jagannatha to show that he was not doing anything unnatural. However, the frightened face of the priest made him extend his hand like a victim of violence. Even though no one was pulling him back by the hand, he felt as if he was being held back, and holding his breath, he rushed in and grabbed the shaligrama casket. Even though he knew that the pressure he felt was laughable, his eyes burned. His face was hot. Bhatta, the priest, standing behind the lamp's sharp flame was a long shadow. Jagannatha tried to smile but ended up with a strange look on his face. Bhatta, not knowing what to do, increased the flame by adjusting the wick, and trying a smile, asked, "What is it you want?" Jagannatha replied softly, "Nothing." And then he added politely and apologetically, "It's just for five minutes. I'll bring it back."

Suppressing an impulse to run away, he went to the door of the puja room, head lowered all the way down. Slowly he walked over to the verandah. Even though it was unnecessary, his hand clutched the shaligrama casket till it hurt.

He came down from the verandah to the yard. He resisted the temptation to look back. However, he felt that at the door, Chikki, priest Bhatta, the cook and his children were watching him. He could have looked back at them straight in the face, and thus rejecting their appeal, freed himself from his plight. But he was too frightened to look back. He also felt that looking them straight in the eye and thus treating their pain with contempt would be too cruel. The hand that held the casket was damp. The shaligrama had probably never crossed the threshold. Chikki must be crushed and speechless. Might be praying for his return, with her entire life gathered in her eyes. He wondered why he was standing still and looked ahead. The untouchables clad in white dhotis and shirts were standing beyond the yard like orphans. Their eyes were blank. They were simply watching him and Chikki at the door. They did not know what was going to explode next. They did not want to know.

Jagannatha walked slowly. On the shoulder of the distant hill, the sun was a red ball. On a hillock of grass shone the soft light of the receding sun. At the bottom of the hill, on the snaky road came the last bus from Shimoga kicking up dust. The

cattle, bells ringing, walked towards the shed. Chikki normally would be standing at this time near the shed watching the cattle. Kaveri, with a load of cut wood on her head, the flap of her saree gathered up and tucked into her midriff, crossed the yard, walking rapidly because of the weight. She must have found these untouchable lads wearing white shirts and dhotis quite funny. She chuckled.

Jagannatha suddenly felt that the whole thing was absurd. This shaligrama, as far as he was concerned, was just a ball of stone. But yet, what an intense drama was being played with this stone ball as the focal point! Why did he think that for the untouchables, touching this ball of stone was a profound experience? He wondered whether there was any connection between the rational self in him that had thought clearly and logically and come to the scientific conclusion that God did not exist, and the other self, which was converting the yard into a magnetic sphere, with the untouchables in front of him and Chikki at his back.

Even though he realized in a flash the irony involved here, that it was he, an atheist, who was making a ball of stone into the shaligrama, he could not move from where he stood. With great difficulty he saw what was at his back. The entire household, beginning with Chikki had gathered there. At a corner of the verandah were standing the labourers. They were all staring at him. Chikki's mouth must have gone dry. Otherwise, she would have definitely called out to him. She stood there like a mother watching her son's dead body being taken to the cemetery. All her thoughts about the Narasimha shaligrama which had never crossed the threshold of this house for a thousand years became part of his consciousness. He felt as if Chikki's eyes were on him and the black stone ball, gripped tightly in his hand, burned like live coal.

Was Jagannatha doing all this for the untouchables or for himself? Was it to jettison his Brahminism? Was he, by this act, turning into an Adiga-like ascetic? Jagannatha was confounded, feeling that the Marxes and Russells, from whom he had learned so much, were evaporating from him.

He tried again to clarify for himself his thought process. The untouchables, expecting nothing, were standing in front

of him like shadows yet to acquire substance and shape. He should not stand there ambivalently. The minute he wavered, weakened, Chikki's eyes would invade and conquer him. The Jagannatha, who had boldly lifted the shaligrama casket and was now holding it aloft, and the Jagannatha who might retrace his steps in a vulnerable moment were not two different selves. Why did he get the idea of acting in this particular way? Because he wanted the untouchables to touch first the household shaligrama before they embarked on entering the temple. Otherwise, his decision would not be authentic and resolute and the untouchables would not receive the new, forsaking the old. If he were to be ready for the cruelty necessary for his intended step, this would be his first real lesson in radical transformation. Now, he had to step forward, certain that his thought process was sound. That was it. Or else, Chikki at his back would win. He turned back severely once again. The whole house looked ghostly. It had rejected him, and after turning him into a dried-up thing, thrown him into the yard to lie there.

The fear and tension in the air must have filled the untouchables in white shirts and dhotis — who stood there as if already accused — with panic. They might leave if he did not cross the yard and thrust the black stone in front of them! Jagannatha understood that the situation demanded immediate action — any action. He started walking fast.

As he walked, he thought: the most important question was this. Why was he so obsessed with God? Why and how did the black stone ball that he wanted to prove conclusively as nothing, become the shaligrama? Why did bells ring in him? He was walking every step like a Vedic priest performing a strange ritual, transforming a black stone into a shaligrama, asserting all the while that it was a mere stone! The eyes of the untouchables, like the eyes of grazing cattle which look up without any particular expectation, were watching him. They hoped for nothing. They had no past and no future. And the eyes at his back had compassion. They tried to pull him back. Would he turn back? Or would he turn over and fructify in the minds of the untouchables? He had to wait and see!

He went close to the untouchables and stood there. They stepped back finding their master so close to them. He felt so absurd opening the casket that he thought that if bells and gongs sounded now, that would be an appropriate comment on what he was up to. However, that fateful moment when he held the black stone ball in his palm and stretched his hand towards the untouchables came slowly but certainly and occupied him without his becoming aware of it. The nerves of his neck swelled. He said in a deep trembling voice, "Touch it."

He looked around. The sun was setting. At the door, dread-stricken Chikki and Bhatta. Janardhana Setty was standing in a corner of the yard. The Vokkaliga workers with their knives tucked in at their waist were watching in a group from another corner of the yard. Kaveri stood leaning against the verandah, wiping her face. Facing them all stood the untouchables like idiots. Jagannatha's body trembled. His hair stood on end. He pleaded with them again, using an appeasing voice, "Touch this."

The words that Jagannatha wanted to say stuck in his throat. In a sense, he told himself, "This is first matter, a mere stone. Touch this. I hold my life in my hand in offering this to you. Touch this. The deepest part of my inner being is invested here. Touch this. This is the propitious hour of evening prayers. Touch this. The eternal lamp is burning in vain in the puja room. Touch this. My people at my back are pulling at me, reminding me of a thousand obligations. What are you waiting for? Touch this. Understand what is happening here. By offering this as a mere stone, I turn it into a shaligrama. The minute you touch this, it turns into a mere stone for all these people. My anguish will then become a shaligrama. Because I offer this to you, because you touch it and because these people will witness it on this darkening evening, let stone turn into shaligrama and let shaligrama turn into stone. You Pilla, who does not quail when a wild boar or a tiger appears, touch this and turn it into stone. After that, in a single step, crossing the threshold of the temple, centuries will be shaken. Touch this. Touch it now. Touch, touch. . . see how easy it is! Touch!"

Jagannatha's hand was damp. The untouchables drew back, stunned. They and the people at his back had rejected his anguish that evening. Jagannatha tried to understand the situation with whatever wisdom he had. He knew. They had seen suspects being asked to touch a sanctified nut to check whether they were thieves. Sacred red rice on a plate. The nut with a tuft and vermilion, looking like a face, over the rice. They had seen people touching it one by one. And then someone, when his turn came, nerves swollen, unable to breathe, fainting. And so, Bhootharaya with singara in his hand, vermilion on his head, shaking and punishing the guilty one — that Bhootharaya had appeared before them at this moment as Jagannatha's stone offering.

"This is just stone. Touch it and see. You will know. If you don't, you will remain idiots for ever."

Jagannatha thus tried to persuade them in the same tone of voice that he used in teaching them how to read and write. But... who could know what suddenly happened to them? They stepped back as a group. Their faces distorted and ugly with fear, they suffered, not being able to run or stay. Jagannatha, who had longed for this moment when the untouchables would touch the untouchable shaligrama, was enraged. He spoke in an indignant, shaky voice, "Come, touch this — now!" Seeing their master advancing towards them, they again moved back, perplexed. Jagannatha had turned cruel by now. They appeared to him like disgusting worms.

Gnashing his teeth, he said softly, "You Pilla, come on. Touch this." Pilla stood blinking. Jagannatha felt that all his effort all these days had been futile. He screamed in a horrendous voice. "Come here, you. Touch this!" Jagannatha's voice sounded like a provoked animal's. He himself was frightened by the scream that issued from him unconsciously. Barring cruelty, all feelings disappeared from him. Looking more frightening than Bhootharaya, Jagannatha roared, "Touch this, touch this, touch!" Nonplussed by this piercing cry, the untouchables came forward mechanically, touched with no feeling whatsoever what Jagannatha had extended to them and withdraw swiftly.

Jagannatha, weakened by cruelty and grief, threw away the shaligrama. His moral anguish had been thoroughly twisted and distorted. He had even lost for a moment the very human

feeling Chikki had for the untouchables. He had seen them as meaningless things. Jagannatha stood, hanging his head. He did not realize that the untouchables had left. When he found out that there was no one around him, it was already dark. Loathing himself, he paced around for a while. How he and they had died, losing their humanity, when they touched the stone! The reason for it — was it inside him or outside in society? Not being able to clarify that, he walked for a long time in a daze and then came home. Chikki did not show her face. She had shut the door of her room. The priest Bhatta, and the cook had packed and were ready to depart. Shanbhog Shastri, who had watched all this from a window, came and faced him. Jagannatha told him quietly, "Shastrigale, these people seem ready to leave us. Calculate what we owe and pay them. Give them a bonus — a month's pay as well. They may not find jobs for a while." The priest and the cook who viewed him as a mad man said, "We will be going, good-bye." They saluted and left. Jagannatha was sad that he and Chikki were the only two left in this house. The cook said before going out, "Your breakfast is on a plate in your room." He had done his last bit of duty. Jagannatha simply said, "Thanks. You may go now."

Fifteen

At night, no one but Chikki and a servant were in the house. When he saw Chikki's drawn face, he felt like saying something. He tried to tell her that he was not an idiot, and that, if he had thought his decision was immature at any stage, he would have given up the whole thing. But he could not. So, he said, "I am tired. I will bathe before eating." His bath lasted long enough for him to perspire again.

Chikki served food. Jagannatha ate just a little rice and rasam[1] and went upstairs. It was a cold December night. He read for a short while, put out the light and lay down. To do anything

[1] a well-seasoned thin soup regularly eaten with rice.

without joy was useless. The whole environment was enervating. The minute he stretched his legs and covered himself with a shawl, he felt comforted. Because his life during the day was becoming increasingly social, the time he spent alone in bed at night meant very much to him.

He remembered the letters that had appeared in the papers that day. Neither the letters that opposed his move nor the ones that endorsed it were meaningful. His mind became light and wandered. Would Margaret like that school? Would she be disillusioned by the chasm between Desai's idealism and the school's actuality? He decided to write to Margaret. He remembered his mother then relived watching Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at Stratford. In Bharatipura every year, at the time of the Chariot Festival, there used to be a *Yakshagana*[1] performance in his front yard at his family's expense. He felt hurt that nobody had come to ask for it this year.

When he was just about to fall asleep, he heard someone screaming outside, "Oh, my God!" in a terrified voice. Jagannatha got up and came down with a torch. Out of the thick darkness came the sound of crying—

Jagannatha could discern Pilla's father and mother in the faint torchlight. Pilla's father, wearing just a piece of loin cloth, was shivering in the cold. His hair was dishevelled, his eyes red, and he reeked of alcohol. Jagannatha asked quietly, "What is the matter?"

Pilla's father spoke in frightened gasps. After questioning him repeatedly, all that Jagannatha could gather was that the police had taken Pilla into custody that night. Why or where his parents did not know.

Jagannatha consoled them, "Go back to your hut. I will fetch Pilla." They were still crying so he had to both encourage and scold them. Not bothering to change his clothes, he drove straight to Bharathipura police station.

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[1] a popular dance-drama of South and North Karnataka on classical themes.

A police duffedar[1] with a huge moustache saluted Jagannatha as soon as he saw him. Jagannatha asked in an authoritative voice, "Who is on duty here?"

"I am, sir. Why?

"Please ask the Inspector to come here for a minute." Jagannatha sat on a chair in front of the table. The duffedar was standing. "Sir, the saheb is asleep."

Jagannatha asked in a stern voice, "It seems you have brought Pilla, one of our workers, here. I came to find out why."

"Sir, it is a criminal case."

"Tell me what the case is all about. I am prepared to bail him out. Free him from the lock-up first.

The duffedar appeared perturbed. Still standing, he said humbly, "These untouchable bastards have become arrogant. This Pilla here, tried to rape a Shetty girl. We received a complaint. So..."

"Show me the statement."

The duffedar sounded scared. "Sir, the girl's people pleaded that we should not prosecute Pilla because it would destroy the girl's reputation. They want us to give him a thrashing and let him go."

"Duffedar, this sort of action is illegal. Do you know what would happen if I were to complain to the District Police Superintendent? Where is Pilla? Where are the girl's people?"

"Sir, it is Sheenappa, one of the Shettys working for you—he is the one. He said that his boss was out of town, otherwise he himself would have been here."

"Where is Pilla? Show him to me first."

"We will register a case against him, if that's so, Sir."

Jagannatha realized that the duffedar was not going to release Pilla that easily. He said aggressively, "Look here, if you don't release Pilla now, I will have to create a noise about your illegal conduct. First, let me see Pilla."

"I don't generally disobey the words of big people, Sir. But, these untouchable bastards..."

"Look here, duffedar, where is Pilla?"

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[1] head of a party of police.

Jagannatha stood up trembling with rage. The duffedar walked towards the lock-up with a bunch of keys. He opened the door and stood by silently. Jagannatha turned on the torch. Pilla sat huddled in a corner. He did not seem to be aware of himself. Only when Jagannatha shouted "Pilla," did he lift his face disfigured by pain. His eyes were swollen. Blood trickled from his nose and lips. His eyes did not seem to be capable of any recognition. Jagannatha went close to him and looked at him in the torchlight. There were blood spots all over the white clothes Jagannatha had bought for him. His shirt collar and sleeves were torn.

Jagannatha was in a rage.

"Are you human beings or animals?"

"It is Sheenappa's people who hit him in the face. I did beat him a little to make him talk. If not, these fellows won't open their mouths."

Jagannatha felt exhausted. Pilla was not even human to the duffedar, the ignorance of centuries lay behind this display of violence. An untouchable had desired a caste girl. But this violation, which any one could have committed, had become an unpardonable sin in Pilla's case, just because he happened to be an untouchable. As Jagannatha knew that this attitude was quite natural in the existing scheme of things, he thought it was futile to get angry with the duffedar. He swallowed his pain and anger and told Pilla, "Get up. Let's go."

Pilla, a strong and sturdy young man, lay like a frightened animal and it sickened Jagannatha to see the blood on his white clothes. When Pilla heard the duffedar say harshly, "Get up," he sank further into the corner like a frightened worm. Jagannatha told the duffedar. "You please keep quiet," and extended his hand to Pilla to help him get up.

"Sir, why do you want to touch that man. Nothing is the matter with him. He will get up," The duffedar spoke haughtily. Jagannatha ignored him and gently took hold of Pilla's shoulder. Pilla seemed to collapse as soon as Jagannatha touched him. Jagannatha reassured him, "Don't be afraid. Come with me." Paying no attention to Pilla's fear, Jagannatha led him gently from the lock-up to the car. He told the duffedar who

was watching all this with disbelief, "If you want, I will talk to the Inspector tomorrow." He drove off.

Pilla would not come up to the verandah. After Jagannatha persuaded him to climb up, he refused to enter the central hall. Jagannatha woke up the servant and asked him to light a gas lamp. He went in and brought tincture, cotton and dettol. He disrobed Pilla. Pilla groaned as Jagannatha nursed his wounds. There were welts all over his dark body. Jagannatha washed Pilla's wounds, applied tincture and gently laid him on the mat. After he made Pilla drink a little brandy, he seemed to recover.

Naked, Pilla was shivering; Jagannatha brought him his own dhoti and shirt and clothed him. He gave him a blanket to cover himself. Pilla's face contorted with fear. Jagannatha said softly,

"Did you drink too much in the evening?"

Pilla nodded, and with some difficulty, sat up.

"Did you do what they accused you of doing?" Pilla abruptly knelt in prayer to Jagannatha from his sitting position. Jagannatha said, "Come on, get up." Then he asked, "Was it Kaveri?"

Pilla's silence suggested agreement.

"Pilla, there's nothing wrong in desiring someone. Because you are an untouchable, your desire is looked upon as a great sin by others. But, look, you should not force yourself on an unwilling girl. That's all. Tell me, what happened?"

To Jagannatha's surprise, their relationship for the first time, was without any strain. Stammering, Pilla narrated what had happened. But they were the first real words he had spoken. This dialogue between them sitting on the verandah under the gas light became an unforgettable event to Jagannatha.

Pilla had not raped her. He was drunk. He was walking home, singing to himself. People at the liquor store had laughed at his white clothes. He was angry but he was also flattered. As he was walking in this state in the twilight, he thought he saw something in the bushes. On closer look, he saw Janardana Shetty disrobing Kaveri. They did not see Pilla. As Pilla looked on, he felt something he could not understand. Abruptly, he headed straight to where the naked Kaveri was. Shetty ran away when he saw Pilla coming. Kaveri tried to cover herself. And Pilla stood there staring. Suddenly, Janardana Shetty struck

Pilla on head with something, felling him. When he regained consciousness, there was no one around. He got up and went home. He did not say anything to anyone. His parents probably thought that he had engaged in a drunken brawl. A little later that night, a policeman came to Pilla's hut and dragged him away to the police station. He beat him up, broke his bones and locked him up. It was a strange experience for Jagannatha to realize that both he and Pilla had desired the same girl. The strong black body facing him under the gas light was like his own, carnal and fully alive. Jagannatha thought that he could really touch this untouchable.

"Pilla, all of you should come with me to the temple without fear. Do you understand?" Jagannatha asked in a shaking voice. He was delighted to see a friendly look on Pilla's face. He thought he could now converse genuinely with Pilla.

"Do you want to sleep here or go home?"

"I'll go home, master," Pilla struggled to stand on his feet.

"I'll come with you some distance." Jagannatha took the torch and helped Pilla who had difficulty walking. As soon as he held Pilla's hand. Pilla protested, "Don't touch me, master." Jagannatha liked Pilla's directness.

"You ass, what happens if I touch you"?

Jagannatha walked up to the hutments section of the town with Pilla. He wanted to go in. But because the untouchables believed that a Brahmin entering their huts would bring them bad luck, he thought it improper for him to go in without being invited.

Jagannatha said, "Don't be afraid. Tomorrow, all of you must come and see me." He came home and lay down. Chikki was still awake but did not ask any questions.

He had offered his family shaligrama to Pilla to touch. Pilla extended his hand to Kaveri desiring her body. As Jagannatha was trying to grasp whatever had awakened in Pilla, and after grasping it, to accept it, he remembered his stealing Adiga's five rupee note, his rapturous watching of Sheenappa stealing from his farm. And these memories left him wondering about this curious aspect in his nature. What did it mean? Finally, overcome by fatigue, Jagannatha fell asleep.

Sixteen

Next morning, Kaveri did not show up for work. Nor did Shetty. Shanbhog Shastri stood before Jagannatha in utter humility, and pretending that he had no knowledge of all that had happened, said, "Shetty's workers are threatening to go on strike, what shall we do?" "We will go to South Kannara district and hire new labour," asserted Jagannatha. He asked Rao's son, Ranganna, "Is your father home"? Ranganna replied, "He said he was going to get the mail." And turned to writing something in the ledger.

Jagannatha went out for a stroll. Seeing Rao at a distance, he felt glad and waited for him in the yard. Rao, who came up to him walking fast, appeared to be in a panic. The news of Jagannatha's offering of the shaligrama to the untouchables had been spread all over town by the cook and the house priest.

Jagannatha took Rao upstairs and told him in private about the police brutality perpetrated on Pilla. Rao had heard that too and expressed concern over the possibility of violence erupting. When Jagannatha promised to withdraw the minute he found his action immature or half-baked, Rao replied that it was perhaps too late to retract. Jagannatha wanted to say that he was happy about Pilla's desire for Kaveri, but desisted, thinking that Rao would not understand.

Instead he asked Rao, "What's in the newspapers today?"

"Nothing much. As usual, there are a few letters to the editor. There's the news of Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao of the Mysore Socialist Party[1] leaving Mysore for Bharathipura to take part in the campaign. Magadi Ananthakrishna has written to me saying that he too is coming here to represent the Sarvodaya office bearers. That's about it."

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[1] formerly, a faction of the Socialist Party that originated in Mysore.

"Rayare, Chikki has stopped talking to me. She seems to be extremely frightened. And we don't have a cook. Will you please give her some moral support to get back to normal?"

"Jaganna, I'll do that. But what I came here for is to tell you that you should not waste a minute. The Deputy Commissioner of Shimoga is an untouchable named Sathyaprakash. You should talk to him. Tell him to send enough policemen to prevent any violence at the time of the Festival. You might have read about the burning of untouchables in Andhra Pradesh. We can't be sure that such things won't happen here."

Jagannatha thought Rao's advice was sound. "You are right. I'll go to Shimoga right now. I'll be back before evening. You take care of Chikki in the meanwhile."

Jagannatha changed into fresh clothes and drove off. On the way, Vasu raised his hand and stopped the car. Prabhu and Nagaraja Jois were with him. Vasu said, "Are you going to Shimoga? If you are, we'll come too." Jagannatha could not say no. Vasu began chatting. He spoke of some North Indian sweet-maker whom he wanted to bring to Bharathipura to set up a stall for the Festival. Then he asked Jagannatha why he had taken so much on his shoulders when he could have sat back and been comfortable.

Jagannatha drove silently. Jois told Vasu, "There's another question more important than whether or not Jagannatha Rao is doing the right thing. The Upanishads say that if any one sage or seer could see everything, he would be in possession of absolute truth, and there would be no need for other seers. What Jagannatha Rao is doing is to move what has come to a standstill. But for that..."

Prabhu asked, "What work have you in Shimoga?"

"My son is just thirty years old. You know about Nagamani. What can I do? Someone has come forward with a marriage proposal. That party doesn't mind a match with a widower. My son is educated. I want to talk to him about this proposal and set a date for the wedding."

Prabhu asked Jagannatha, "Why didn't you bring a new car from England?"

Jagannatha answered listlessly, "No particular reason."

"Maybe you did the right thing. With roads such as this, a good car doesn't last very long here. After Independence, nothing gets done in our country without bribes!" Jagannatha adjusted the rear view mirror as a gesture to show that he did not want to talk while driving and drove on silently. Prabhu told Vasu, "This new Deputy Commissioner, my God! He does nothing without a payoff. Besides, he is an untouchable. No one here to stop him. To add to all that, it seems he is related to some minister."

Vasu began describing what disasters were likely to occur if untouchables were encouraged socially, mainly to prick and hurt Jagannatha. How some untouchable member of parliament in Delhi had tried to molest a woman in the room next to his and how he was cut down to size by Nehru. Vasu's tirade began with this story and ended with cheap jokes about them. He spoke of some untouchable minister and his wife who came to Bangalore and stayed in a hotel, the very day he was made a minister. The wife went into the attached bathroom, and overwhelmed by its appearance and decor, sat down on the floor. After a long time, the worried minister, opened the door and as soon as she saw her husband, she exclaimed, "Oh! What a marvellous place. We can eat and sleep here!"

Jagannatha slowed down the car, stared angrily at Vasu sitting next to him and said, "Shut up. You are disgusting."

Vasu was taken aback seeing Jagannatha shaking with anger. Prabhu changed the topic.

"Jagannatha Rao has not taken what I said seriously. If you rely on Gurappa Gowda, Bharathipura will never progress. He spends his time scaring shanbhogs, getting roads where rich Gowdas reside repaired and managing Amildar's transfers. Other than these activities he is good for nothing. You should do something. That's our only hope."

Jagannatha conveyed his consent without using words. Vasu, trying in vain to look upon Jagannatha's anger as a joke, said, "Excuse me," as he got out of the car. Dropping off all three of them in front of the National Lodge, Jagannatha went straight to the Deputy Commissioner's Office.

SATHYAPRAKASH, B.A., B.L., "IN." Jagannatha saw the board, wrote out his name on a slip of paper and gave it to a thin man, sitting on a high stool. The thin man's face had the mark of Vishnu[1] a conch and chakra[2] that were fading. He wore a white cap over his tufted head. Though he did not have any footwear, he was in a peon's uniform — white shirt and baggy white trousers. Balaram — that was his name — was a poor cowlike Brahmin. A peon who darted like an arrow to his boss the minute he heard the call bell. Jagannatha was reminded of a magician's sleight-of-hand in the festival in which a camphor ball would move in and out as the magician kept chanting, "Ulaay, pidaay, ulaay, pidaay, ulaay, pidaay.[3]" Perhaps this thin man found bathing, changing his sacred thread[4], consuming cow's urine and dung every evening unavoidable to remain the head of a Brahmin family, because every time he took the (untouchable) visitor's slip of paper to his boss, he invariably touched his hand. Jagannatha looked at his lazy face with some compassion. The peon had not been impressed by Jagannatha's clothes. He said, "The saab[5] is busy working. You have to wait." After Jagannatha asked him politely. "Please give this chit to your boss," he made a face and reluctantly went into the boss's chamber. Perhaps Sathyaprakash was venting his ire against the upper caste people on this poor soul. Jagannatha realised how tough it was to understand a country where Pilla, Sathyaprakash and this peon coexisted.

Because the sahib had asked that Jagannatha be shown in immediately, the peon's face was now humble. He opened the door and bowed deferentially. Sathyaprakash got up and shook his hand. He was short and dark-skinned with pockmarks on his face and body. What attracted the visitor's immediate attention were his big coarse ears. In his gestures and movements, one could sense his ostentatious desire to please. His broad smile

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[1] a black, charcoal line drawn along the forehead by Vaishnava Brahmins of the Madhva sect.

[2] the conch and discus are divine instruments held by Lord Vishnu.

[3] words in the Tulu language spoken by a group of people in South Kanara region meaning inside and outside.

[4] the investiture of Brahmin boys with the sacrificial thread worn over the left shoulder diagonally across the body to the right hip.

[5] the sahib; boss.

which signalled his high opinion of himself revealed the method he had used in climbing the bureaucratic ladder.

"Please come in and sit down. By coming to see me, you have blessed me," Sathyaprakash said.

How artificial Sathyaprakash's Kannada sounded! What a pity. When an untouchable young man changed into an officer, he tended to lose all his spontaneity! Jagannatha asked all the formal questions while surveying the room with curiosity. Photos of Gandhi, Nehru, and the Chief Minister of Mysore were on one of the walls. On another was a big photo of Lord Manjunatha. The marks left by turmeric and vermilion proved that the photo had been there for years. The ash from the incense stick was all over the glass frame of the photograph. Rubbing the khadi tablecloth and playing with the call bell, Sathyaprakash spoke like a man reading a book.

"Our place is Tumkur. If our society has to progress, young people like you should commit themselves to the nation's service. Just as Karanth says, you have come back to the soil. The other day, when I attended the Deputy Commissioners' Conference in Bangalore, I told Narayan — you know Narayan our relative, my wife and his wife are sisters — our Health Minister, I told him about you. He was very happy."

gg Jagannatha sat in silence. The artificiality of the atmosphere sickened him. Paper flowers on the table! Coffee stains on the table cloth. Sathyaprakash's fingers ever eager to ring the bell.

Sathyaprakash began speaking again, "I heard that you were in England. I went on a foreign tour also. To Japan. In connection with the cooperative movement. What a country, Japan! It surprised me. Our people are damn lazy. Take my own people, how many facilities and opportunities our Government has created for them! But everything is misused by our people. The students in our hostels eat free meals and waste time drinking. That's why I tell our boys, 'Take a look at the Brahmin boys. They pass their examinations even if they have to study under street lamps. What's wrong with you people?' You see, the son of my peon Govindacharya and my son have studied together. But, his son has passed in the first division throughout and my son cannot pass without grace marks!"

Sathyaprakash's fingers finally pressed the bell. The peon came in at a run and stood with his head bowed.

Sathyaprakash told him, "Acharya, go to my house and get us coffee in a flask," and then turned to Jagannatha, "Mister Jagannath, the coffee from the canteen is no good." Jagannatha's curiosity about this man grew because he addressed the peon, using the deferential plural of "You." This man would get coffee from his house to test whether Jagannatha would drink it. He would have a Brahmin peon out of spite, but address him in the plural. He would speak with humility and finesse in artificial Kannada, but probably burn with hostility inside. He was using all his powers to please Jagannatha because he was an educated Brahmin. Pilla might turn into another Sathyaprakash! But he, who had put his hand to the wheel to create movement, should be ready even for that irony of history.

Jagannatha brought up the subject he had come to discuss, "Perhaps you know why I am here."

"I guessed. Mister Jagannath, what you are doing is a great thing. Look at me. I have been to every temple, more or less — Tirupathi, Rameshwara, Madurai[1] — no one has stopped me anywhere. Our people should first become educated. They are still living in a world of superstitions. We have subsects among us who cannot stand each other. I have no sympathy for some of my own people. People like you should raise them by lending your hand. Do you know who encouraged me most? A Brahmin teacher at Gubbi High School."

Coffee arrived. The tragic irony involved in not being able to have normal human relations with Pilla or with Sathyaprakash bothered Jagannatha. Some artificiality intervened. The peon poured coffee into cups and served the two of them. The coffee was excessively sweet with blobs of cream floating in it — Jagannatha had a hard time drinking it.

"What I came to tell you, Mr. Sathyaprakash, is that there may be trouble on Festival Day. Therefore, we want you to provide preventive police presence in town" saying which, Jagannatha waited for Sathyaprakash's reaction. Sathyaprakash spoke with a mask of wisdom.

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[1] centres of pilgrimage located in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

"I was about to tell you about it, Mr. Jagannath. I have already received many representations. Don't have this entry programme on Festival Day. Do it quietly on another day. I'll join you. Our country is known for its love for peace. The day I took charge here, the Manjunatha Temple Committee arranged for a special service and sent me the prasada. Everyone will change gradually. What the Shaivas worship as Shiva is worshipped by others under a different name. That's what Nehru called religious tolerance. Slow and steady—that's my policy. I beg of you as an untouchable..."

Sathyaprakash folded his hands in salute and stood up. The bad taste of sweet coffee was still in Jagannatha's mouth. Shaking in disgust, he too got up. And said, "We cannot go back on our planned action. If the untouchables were not ready, that would be different. You are responsible for law and order in Bharathipura on that day. I came to tell you that."

Sathyaprakash must have been frightened by Jagannatha's serious but harsh tone of voice. He walked up to the car with him. Muttering about peace, nonviolence, and the need for the untouchables to maintain good relations with upper castes, their first priority being education etc., Sathyaprakash saluted Jagannatha and bade him good-bye.

Seventeen

Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao, leaders of the Mysore Socialist Party, came straight to Jagannatha's house, bag and flag in hand. Sripathi Rao welcomed them, got Chikki to serve them coffee and snacks, and then lodged them in a big room adjoining the office. As soon as Jagannatha arrived, Neelakantaswamy introduced himself: M.A. in political science, now, a final-year law student, President of the Law College Association, and Secretary of the Mysore Socialist Party. Ranga Rao added that no function in Mysore could do without Neelakantaswamy's lecture. Neelakantaswamy then introduced Ranga Rao: M.A. in

Political Science, currently engaged in building the organization. Neelakantaswamy then explained why they had to break away from the Socialist Party and form their own. Because the President had abused his office for personal gain, practised casteism by appointing a man from his own caste as secretary etc. When he spoke, he tended to thrust his fingers into his curly hair, single out a strand, pull it from its root, throw it aside and then search his scalp for another strand to pluck. Jagannatha was revolted. "Please rest, We'll see you later," he said and went to his room. Sripathi Rao followed him. He shut the door and commented with gentle intimacy.

"Jaganna, you have to be a little careful in dealing with these people. You know what they were saying? Perhaps they did not know I was right outside. Neelakantaswamy said to Ranga Rao, 'What if we make Jagannatha the Party President?' To that Ranga Rao replied, 'A Brahmin is a Brahmin.' Ranga Rao is a Vokkaliga. Neelakantaswamy is a Lingayat. It is true that there's no love lost between them. But, they do things for expediency. Neelakantaswamy told Ranga Rao, 'It is a strategy, Ranga Rao. Next time Jagannatha will be a strong party candidate.' I was deeply upset by what they said. You know what Ranga Rao did as soon as he came? He changed, went to the temple and brought prasada with him. When I said, 'What you did is not right', he brushed it aside by saying, 'Nobody knows me here and so it is all right. My mother is a great devotee of Manjunatha'. Neelakantaswamy also did not like what Ranga Rao did but for a totally different reason. Being a Lingayat, he does not care much for prasada received from Brahmin priest. The reason why I am saying all this is simple. It is to say, Jaganna, politics is new to you. So be careful."

While Rao put it all theatrically and juicily, Jagannatha received it quietly. He told Rao, "We have to use even such people to achieve our purpose." Rao smiled and said, "You are a fool. Instead of your using them, they will exploit you. You wait and see." Jagannatha described his meeting with the Deputy Commissioner. Rao commenced, "I know it. He is an awfully corrupt man." He stood up. Jagannatha lay outstretched on his bed.

Rao told Jagannatha, "Many others may come here to eat. Chikki cannot manage alone. I'll send my wife."

"Did you comfort Chikki?" "Yes. She has sent for Adiga to ask him to purify the shaligrama and reinstall it with a service. She weeps saying that she cannot eat without receiving theertha[1]. I feel sorry for her. Gopala's arrival tomorrow will comfort her."

The deep affection that both his mother and Chikki had for Gopala, the scrivener Krishnappa's son, was astonishing to Jagannatha. He was pleased that Gopala was coming. He wanted Chikki to be happy.

Rao said while leaving, "Jaganna, ask your untouchables not to walk the market streets in their white clothes. If people see too many of them in this fashion, they might start trouble."

The untouchable youths came in the evening. Pilla's coming, in spite of his aches, delighted Jagannatha. He looked friendlier than he had ever been before. Jagannatha told them about his visit to the Deputy Commissioner. He also told them that the D.C. belonged to their caste just to encourage them. He introduced Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao to them saying that they had come expressly to help them enter the temple. He then asked Neelakantaswamy to explain socialism to them. Thinking that his own presence might be embarrassing to them, he went into the house.

Rao's wife Bhagyamma and Savithri who was on leave had come to help Chikki. Jagannatha went down the hill for a stroll.

Rao too ate there that night. Jagannatha was pleased to see a Lingayat and a Vokkaliga eating together in his house. Chikki served them all silently. Neelakantaswamy said that a few more socialist party members were coming the next day. Ranga Rao suggested that they should start a farmer's organization in Bharathipura. There was a letter from the Brahmin Youth Association in the newspaper, the next morning condemning the untouchable entry into the temple. Jagannatha got two letters that the mail bus brought him. One was from

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[1] water made holy because an idol is washed in it. This water is sacred and is drunk in small spoonfuls for purification.

Ramesh Chandra, a reader in sociology at Mysore University. Jagannatha had known him for quite some time. He was from a famous Hoysala Karnataka Brahmin[1] family in Nanjangud. He had worn earrings[2] till he finished his B.A. In England he had learnt how to don a three-piece suit without spoiling the creases and folds. The way he used to rub his spectacles with a handkerchief before launching into a serious discussion, his body bent forward slightly, persuaded people to think he was an intellectual. He would uphold the Indian caste system in an ingenious, subtle way, "Sir, do you know what a rich life our kumbaras[3] live?" But then he would attack England's colour prejudice with the same ferocity. If Jagannatha told him he was a hypocrite, he would say, "May I have a cigarette please?" and lighting the borrowed cigarette, he would orate.

"I understand your concern. But Jagan, see what the educated Shudras have become. What has happened to Mysore University? Conflict between Vokkaligas and Lingayats everyday. The University which once upon a time had men like Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna is ruled royally by Kallappa and Siddappa! You should condemn this. What is the use of attacking the caste system? Tell me."

Ramesh Chandra was in a sense the most innocent picture of Indian hypocrisy. He argued with the utmost sincerity, "Adultery is all right for Shudra women but not for Brahmin women. There are no neurotics in India. Indian culture is greater than western culture. If the British had not taught us English, there would have been no trains or electricity in India. Independence should have come much later: it was a mistake to give voting power to the uneducated. These English people who shout about cleanliness, they don't wash their bottoms, do they?" etc. Jagannatha would yawn when he saw Ramesh Chandra's pretty moustache and the way he wrapped his arms about himself while speaking with his so-called concern.

Ramesh Chandra's future had shaped up the way Jagannatha had imagined it. The man who believed in the Indian woman's

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[1] a sub-sect of Brahmins who worship Lord Shiva.
[2] orthodox Hindus pierced the earlobes of their sons.
[3] the potter community.

fidelity to her husband, fell in love with a girl in England. Jagannatha knew that Ramesh Chandra knew that he was not going to marry the girl he fell in love with! Ramesh Chandra savoured the romantic tragic love that he admired in Western literature when he dumped the girl he had loved. He came back to India praising Western cleanliness, honesty and political maturity and then inspected four or five prospective Hoysala Karnataka Brahmin brides as they happened to be favourites of an executive engineer known to him. Finally, he married the plain-looking daughter of the same executive engineer. In the wedding invitation, he appended to his name M.A., (London).

Ramesh Chandra had written him a typical letter in his fine handwriting *I admire your heroism in trying to bring existentialist socialism to Bharathipura. But, as a sociologist I feel that your attempt will fail. This problem of untouchability needs to be solved through arbitration, not through the confrontation that you have planned. Intellectuals like you should attack the neo-Brahmins, namely, Vokkaligas and Lingayats. Perhaps you don't know how these two groups have been fighting over the vice-chancellorship of Bangalore University, destroying in the process the sacredness of academic work. The same in Mysore. If merit were to be the sole criterion, I would have been a professor, I should have been, but...* etc.

The other letter was from England, from Chandrashekar. Jagannatha read this letter and it affected him deeply:

Dear Jagan,

Margaret has told me everything. My brother has written from Bangalore. Perhaps I understand you better than any one else. Your idealism has become inflated with daydreaming. You are now trying to melt it and make it athletic. You want to suffer. Your tragedy is that you will become another kind of hero in this undertaking—that's all, because you can never really love the untouchables. Your personality is so self-absorbed that true love is an impossibility. Writhing in jealousy as I am, I discover more profound truths through human vulnerability than you ever can, living a high-minded life of idealism. Now, you are shifting from one pomposity to another. What surprises me is that even when I know that you are hollow inside, I feel so jealous and hostile. Why? My tragedy is that I am condemned to spend life perpetually carping about people like you. Because I know that only I can tell

you this uncompromising truth, I am writing to condemn your fake liberalism. Margaret doesn't agree with me. However, I know that she feels within her what I say about you is the truth.

Yours with love,
Chandrashekar

Jagannatha went in search of Neelakantaswamy in order to forget Chandrashekar's letter. Neelakantaswamy was busy preparing a report he wanted to send to the papers about the meeting the secretary of the Mysore Socialist Party had with the untouchables. He said, as soon as Jagannatha came, "Issue a statement condemning the local member of the Legislative Assembly."

"Let's do it, but before that, don't you think we should talk to him?"

"Gurappa is a very cunning man. He has gone to Bangalore to avoid getting into a predicament here."

Jagannatha did not feel like talking at all. Though Chandrashekar's letter contained many lies every word had pierced him like a dagger. He took Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao inside, drank coffee with them and left, saying, "I have some work. I will finish it and come back." He went looking for Sripathi Rao. Rao had not stayed on all morning. But his wife and daughter were there helping Chikki.

As Jagannatha was about to enter the main street, he saw some four or five people approaching carrying flags. He guessed from the flags that they were from Neelakantaswamy's group. He pointed out his house to them and said, "Go to my house and rest. I'll be back in an hour." They looked at one another joyfully as if they were there for a picnic or a fair. Jagannatha felt embarrassed when one of them said familiarly, "Yes, comrade." Not showing it, he headed for Rao's khadi shop.

The market streets were festive with decorations. Jagannatha was hurt that no one spoke to him. He had been rejected by the streets of the town of his birth. Rao, having closed shop, was about to go to his house. He was happy because he had news that Sarvodaya's Magadi Ananthakrishna was coming that

evening. He was eager to see this intimate friend of his, a jail mate during the time of Gandhi's Satyagraha[1].

Eighteen

Chandrashekar's letter, untouchables who had not come close to him, Bharathipura that existed unto itself, Rao's wisdom in which no fundamental change was possible — the combination of all these things bewildered Jagannatha.

As they climbed the hill, Jagannatha told Rao, "Rayare, our being differs from our awareness. You may call this hypocrisy. It has not been possible for me to love the untouchables. But I have the awareness that history makes possible in the future what appears impossible today. But yet, my being loathes someone like Sathyaprakash. It behaves artificially with the young untouchable men. This is true, and this is what I call anguish. The gap between awareness and being is inevitable in man. Animals don't have this problem. History, having made me so, keeps plotting to create another reality — even through me. Its field of action exists as much in my consciousness as it does in Bharathipura. For all the seeds of history to sprout, all kinds of things become necessary, including this. Look here, Rao, a conservative does not experience or understand this anguish because he sees only the existing reality in human nature. For those like me, who see not only reality but possibility, anguish is unavoidable."

The enthusiasm that Jagannatha felt at the start of the long statement was absent towards the end. Even though Rao understood what he said, he did not seem to have felt that it was genuine. All these words had been spoken many times over. So, unless the actuality of Bharathipura changed, unless the untouchables got ready to march, unless what seemed to

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[1] the non-violent form of resistance to British rule which Mahatma Gandhi initiated.

be sprouting in Pilla was firmly rooted, Jagannatha's thoughts would remain mere shadows.

When Jagannatha sat down to eat with all the others, he was listless. He knew he could not love anyone in that bunch sitting with him. Chikki who loved him had suffered because of him. No one to whom he was attached would eat in this dining room again. Ranga Rao sitting next to him was eating curry and rice, with hardly any curry. He rolled the curry and rice into a ball and threw it into his month. He did not disturb the mound of rice served. He merely made a hole in it at the centre and poured into that hole a single ladle of curry. The way he mixed rice and curry into a ball as if offering pinda[1] to dead forefathers disgusted Chikki. To her, a Shudra eating this way outside the house was not shocking. But a Shudra doing that in their own dining hall was loathsome. Strangely enough, Jagannatha too unconsciously felt a sense of disgust. He told himself, "I must become insensitive." He did not know how to destroy the caste system that had different worlds for everything—ranging from eating habits to excretory procedures. There was no choice but to blame oneself in impotent rage. There was no escape for anyone in this society from becoming a homeless spirit. However false it might appear, doing the opposite of what he felt might be the right thing. Or at least, the inevitable thing. He had to learn to love this Ranga Rao, this Sathyaprakash or learn now to understand them. Neelakantaswamy said, "Mr. Jagannath, I have written a book on public administration."

"Is that so?"

"I am getting it published. I am trying to get the Maharaja to write a preface to the book."

"But, you being a socialist. . .," Jagannatha teased. Neelakantaswamy replied with a smile, "Just strategy. Otherwise, who would publish my book? Besides, there's a lot of casteism in the Kannada publishing world."

"Is that true?"

"Of course. My book is to be published in Kannada and English. It may be chosen as a textbook. Then, what I

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[1] a ball of rice offered to the ancestors.

say will have value. Even the party will benefit from that." Neelakantaswamy had spoken without any sense of shame. But, Jagannatha was surprised by his optimism and energy. Dirty fellow! But he might be the one to shape the future—till people like Pilla rose up and stood over him. A Brahmin had finesse, was cowardly enough not to put into action what he felt inside. He had the necessary measure of hypocrisy to be seething inside with jealousy and still not show it. But Lingayats and Gowdas had blatant courage, energy and youth. In a society that was in a state of flux, everyone became a self-centred demon, longing to grab everything, as if to fulfil an unfulfilled past life. Tomorrow, Pilla would kick these grinning greedy neo-Brahmins. After that, perhaps he too would grin in greed like Sathyaprakash. From among the seeds history sowed, some would turn mouldy, some would rot and some would sprout. People like Jagannatha should become manure for them.

His words might hurt, he thought. But it did not matter. He told Neelakantaswamy bluntly, "Look, your getting the Maharaja to write a preface, justifying everything you do as strategy is dangerous, also vulgar. It seems Ranga Rao went to the temple as soon as he came and brought the prasada. I hope that you, wanting to join hands with me in action will remain pure."

Neither Neelakantaswamy nor Ranga Rao seemed to feel any resentment. The former said, "I see what you mean," and continued to eat. In a society where success alone mattered, the distinction between what was ephemeral and what was permanent was not clearly visible. For Neeelakantaswamy, success was important. In the past, it was Brahmins who gobbled up everything. Now, it was Neelakantaswamy's turn. Nobody spent a sleepless night over the plight of the untouchables in a country where the conception of Dharma had been in existence for thousands of years!

Rao had eaten in silence. He was gladdened by Jagannatha's plain, truthful talk. Jagannatha was angry that he could not disrupt Rao who had concluded that non-Brahmins were all, by nature, like Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao. He rinsed his hand looking for words that could hurt Rao.

Neelakantaswamy's followers, having rinsed their hands, were picking guava fruits in the backyard. They had not bothered to ask him or Chikki whether they could.

Jagannatha excused himself and went upstairs. Socialists, led by Neelakantaswamy, went to see the town. Rao went with them.

Jagannatha was shocked to see Ganesha, the temple priest's son who had walked straight into his room. He pointed at a chair and asked Ganesha to sit. Ganesha, watching Jagannatha with eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, shut the door and sat down. Faded shirt and dhoti, a prematurely aged face attached to a body that was like an unripe fruit newly blossommed, a sad figure, neither young nor old. A mass of hair on his head, a growth of several months, a tuft longer than his hair. Stubbly beard on his cheeks. Earrings set with precious stones.

Ganesha started to stammer trying to say something.

Jagannatha helped out,

"You want some books?" He himself spoke for Ganesha and brought him Sharat Chandra's novels, which were his mother's favourites.

Ganesha, eyes moving with life, stuttered, "Don't tell anyone that I came here." His stuttering appearing to be like someone suffering pangs, prior to the birth of a new truth. Not really knowing what to say, Jagannatha asked, "You are the eldest son?" Ganesha nodded assent. Again he stared at Jagannatha as if his eyes were about to pop out.

"Ganesha, are you married?" Jagannatha immediately regretted asking this question because Ganesha had seemed despondent while nodding. Jagannatha had to clear the air between them for full communication before Ganesha would say what he needed to say. So, he sat there looking at Ganesha sympathetically. The way Ganesha sat there indicated that something was being worked out inside him. Ganesha seemed to be boiling inside as he sat in that room. Jagannatha was reminded of the blank stare of the untouchable youth. What made Ganesha odd-looking was not only his build and shape but his bloodless wornout face that told the story of hundreds of years of in-breeding.

"What you are doing is the right thing." Ganesha got out what was fermenting within him and started perspiring.

"I am going."

They were Ganesha's last words soon after which he left abruptly taking long strides as he walked. Jagannatha came down. He stood, surprised, watching the speed of that short, disease-stricken body as Ganesha ran down the hill.

Nineteen

Jagannatha closed the door of his room, and reclining, read Margaret's letter eagerly.

First about the International School. She had received Desai's letter. She would be coming next year. Chandrashekar too would come back to work in Bangalore. Then, the weather. Three days of continuous snowfall. Made one feel like sitting in front of the fireplace all the time. Had put on weight from drinking lots of beer. Then, the tremendous transformation of her father. Lively after retirement. Did not care any longer about his wife's nagging. Had opened a shop. Curry powder, mango pickles, papadams—all sorts of Indian things were sold in his shop. He was discovering his identity in a strange way. He would get up early in the morning burn incense sticks before the deity of Tirupathi and worship him. Every evening, he went to the Theosophical Society lectures. He was trying to build an organization that would invite performers of Harikatha[1], sitar and sarod[2] players from India to perform in England. The rest of the letter was about Jagannatha and herself.

I understand why you are rebelling against God. But you should also realize why daddy has begun to feel the need for God. I discussed this with Chandar. He calls you a romantic. He says you are a product of the Nehru era. He is a crazy fellow. I don't agree with everything he says, but I do feel he has insight.

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[1] literally, story of God. Generally the Harikatha performer extemporizes a verse narrative based on one of the Indian legends, with music and dance.

[2] stringed instruments of North India.

When Jagannatha read the letter's last paragraph, his face blanched.

Darling Jagan, we have decided to be open with each other, haven't we? You should not feel hurt by what I am going to tell you now. Since you left, Chandrashekhar has been after me, demanding my love. His jealousy and intensity have enabled me to experience something entirely new, something I had never known before for some strange reason. I have fallen for him and yielded to him. I know you will grieve over this. But, only you can understand and pardon my unreliability.

— Margaret

Jagannatha's hands had become damp. He read the last paragraph repeatedly. He tried to transcend pain by asking to be stabbed in the same spot on his body again and again. He got up and came down. Neelakantaswamy was standing, getting a poster fixed on the car. Tomorrow's lecture and its timings. The place, the speakers, Ranga Rao was testing a battery-run mike system they had installed in the car — "Hello! Hello! Testing." Sarvodaya's Ananthakrishna was discussing Lohia[1] and Gandhi with some young socialists. Shanbhog Shastri peered from the window, then came out and said, "I am going to the South Kanara region to get new labourers." He thus displayed his loyalty and went back. Neelakantaswamy said happily, "People have been gathering. A great opportunity, people from the entire state, from the nation, will be here. Tomorrow, we should mount an effective publicity drive." Ananthakrishna's face bloomed with the prospect of delivering a speech. Ranga Rao muttered, "The mike system is no good." Sripathi Rao commented, "Prabhu bought it for Gurappa Gowda's last campaign."

Jagannatha wished to be away from all of them. He went up the cashew-hill. Suddenly, everything had turned lifeless for him. He talked to himself. Four days more. The untouchables would step into the temple. Stepping forward, they would change the history of centuries. "Margaret. Having mustered a

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[1] Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia: a freedom fighter and also one of the founders of the Socialist Movement in India.

lot of courage, I have been waiting for this historic moment. What a blow you have dealt me!"

Jagannatha had not known till now how much he loved Margaret. The worst hurt came from imagining the body that had known his so intimately being in the arms of another man. She would speak in intimate whispers to him. She would open up for him. She would moan in pleasure. He had become a castaway from this sky, from this time, like a rejected object.

What was left now? Only the imperatives. Things that had to be done. No choice. He would do them. He would walk with the untouchables, be stared at by cruel eyes that had rejected him. Who were these untouchables? Who was he? And who was God? What connection? No promises! The things he had touched and moved, someone else would touch and move. That other man would gloat having killed Jagannatha.

Jagannatha stood on the hill-top and stared blankly at the top of the temple. He could hear Neelakantaswamy exhorting people to attend the next day's meeting.

"An appeal to the people of Bharathipura."

One of the important leaders of the country, who has committed himself to serving the untouchables, sacrificing everything started this campaign. Affirming their support to the campaign initiated by Shri Jagannatha Rao, are the Socialist leader Neelakantaswamy, Joint Secretary Ranga Rao, Sarvodaya leader and Ananthakrishna, a close disciple of Gandhi.

Hear! Hear! Hear! Tomorrow evening at 5 o' clock the above leaders will speak. In the quadrangle of the temple. Come one. Come all.

Jagannatha felt disgusted at the words that broke the silence of Bharathipura. If he did not take control of his mind, the effort of all these days would come to nothing. What sort of man was he? His anguish was real. The only way was to forget oneself in action. That meant becoming inert and forsaking one's private life. Jagannatha was startled by the footsteps he heard. Subraya Adiga came and stood next to him. He said, "I saw your face. I thought you were in great pain. That's why I came." That was all Adiga said. When he walked down the hill with him, Adiga did not ask what was bothering him. He did not provoke him. Jagannatha felt immensely grateful to Adiga

for his sensitive understanding of when to speak and when to be silent.

Chikki had made jilebis for lunch because Adiga had stayed. She must have been happy for Adiga had sanctified, reinstalled and worshipped the Narasimha shaligrama. Besides, Gopala had come from Mysore. His college was on strike. Vokkaliga and Lingayat students were fighting over the Principal. The Lingayats wanted the Principal to resign because he was a Vokkaliga — "Dirty people," said Gopala and blamed everyone. Ranga Rao, upon hearing this news, was upset because he was not there. To prove that he was not casteist, Neelakantaswamy blamed one Lingayat involved and praised another. The same tactic — Ranga Rao attacked the Vokkaliga Principal and applauded the Vokkaliga Registrar. Jagannatha noticed the cold war between these two Socialists.

Adiga ate inside. Ananthakrishna praised the food with great satisfaction. When Jagannatha said to him. "You should speak to the untouchable youths this evening," he gladly agreed and told Jagannatha, "I have written to Vinoba about you. If we receive his blessings, it will be a big boost to our campaign." Jagannatha was still in no mood to talk. As soon as lunch was over, he went upstairs and slept.

Soon after lunch, Neelakantaswamy had taken the car to publicize the march. Jagannatha felt sick listening to his speeches praising himself, Ananthakrishna and Jagannatha.

As the heat subsided, Jagannatha got up and left for Puranik's house. He selected deserted streets and reached his destination unnoticed, like a thief. He felt ashamed to be seen by people who had perhaps heard the pronouncements made over the mike. The by-lanes took him speedily to Puranik's house. He rang the bell. As usual, the goorkha opened the door and wrote his name on a slip of paper. Puranik came down and shook his hand. Although he wore a tie, Puranik's collar was torn. But a well-ironed suit sat on him very neatly. Jagannatha was surprised at Puranik's trim figure. "I was feeling terribly lonely. Thanks for coming. My friend Adhvani is very ill, you see," Puranik

said and took Jagannatha upstairs. Ignoring Jagannatha's refusal, he poured whisky into two glasses and added some soda.

"For the success of your intended revolution!" So saying, Puranik touched Jagannatha's glass with his own.

Jagannatha, sipping his whisky, tried to forget everything. But even in Puranik's room upstairs, Neelakantaswamy's howl could be heard faintly. Jagannatha did not refuse a second helping of whisky. He stretched his legs and closed his eyes. Even then, there was no peace within. His mind turned over the last few lines of Margaret's letter again and again. Puranik turned on the radio. Piano music floated in from somewhere. Jagannatha lit the cigar Puranik gave him. Puranik started the conversation.

"I have ready for you the material I gathered on Bhootharaya. There's a curious folk story in it with two or three different versions. You know, only women after menopause can go up the hill of Bhootharaya. The belief is that if a girl menstruates on the hill, she can't come down as she becomes the possession of Bhootharaya. This song describes the deluge and how it happens. A headstrong Brahmin girl goes up the hill and menstruates. Thus she becomes the possession of Bhootharaya. She is not satisfied and sleeps with a pariah. Bhootharaya is enraged, He comes down the hill and destroys the town in a furious dance. Not even his Lord Manjunatha is able to control him. Evil is let loose. In another version, which is more interesting, Bhootharaya enjoys her in different forms, as a bull, as a horse, as a wild boar and then a Shudra and finally as a pariah. The girl refuses him in the form of the pariah, and so Bhootharaya is enraged and destroys the town. A very interesting story. You must read it."

Jagannatha took the heap of papers tied together and left. When he came home, Neelakantaswamy, Ranga Rao and their followers were talking in the yard. Beyond the yard, Ananthakrishna was making a speech for the benefit of the untouchable youths. Jagannatha was furious when he saw Neelakantaswamy. He said, "Mr. Neelakantaswamy, I didn't like the way you praised me in my own town to propagate your party. It was a vulgar thing to do. Please don't bring your politics into this."

Immediately, thereafter, Jagannatha felt he had been needlessly cruel. But his face was red and he was trembling. However, Neelakantaswamy spoke without a trace of shame or regret. He told Jagannatha, "Politics is new to you. That's why you talk the way you do. You can't start a revolution with gloved hands. You should not be averse to getting your hands dirty."

Jagannatha replied firmly,

"I am sorry. Don't exploit this situation for your politics."

Neelakantaswamy did not seem to register his indignation. Even so, Jagannatha felt satisfied that he had shown his anger anyway. Deciding not to become a plaything in the hands of these cunning politicians, he went to his room. But was Neelakantaswamy the sole reason for his anger? Jagannatha's body burned. He lay down and closed his eyes.

Twenty

On the thirteenth day of the moon's cycle, Jagannatha got up early, washed his face, put on a sweater and stepped out. He remembered that the sweater was a gift from Margaret and all the anguish returned. He felt cold. He climbed the hill swiftly. In the valley where Bharathipura was situated, there was mist, light as silk cotton, that dissolved slowly in the sunlight. Now, sunlight was pressed down by the mist. Gradually, gleaming sunlight pervaded the mist. Memories behind what Jagannatha was watching. The same cold, the same mist. Then, the same childhood memory of sunlight at daybreak, while walking with mother, holding her hand. Now, again, he was in agony. Then, warm water in the river when he went in for a bath. Steam from his mouth. He had remembered all this some other time too! Mossy walls around the temple. Monkeys on the wall. When had he thought of all this? Let the whole enterprise appear evil. Pilla was the sharp edge of an axe. Jagannatha was its handle. He should win. He should give things up. He should learn to gain and then to renounce. Then history would move forward.

The ritual song was sung in the temple to wake the god. Jagannatha had been waiting for the town to wake up and stretch its limbs. He would go to the huts of the untouchables that evening whatever happened! He came home and ate uppuma and drank coffee. There was a festive atmosphere in the dining area. To advertise that evening's programme, Neelakantaswamy, Ranga Rao and their friends went to town. Jagannatha had not seen Chikki since that morning. So he went to the kitchen to see what she was doing. Bhagyamma was chopping vegetables. Chikki, totally absorbed, was moulding an earthen oven. She had the reputation of making the most efficient fireplaces. They burned well. Neither Bhagyamma nor Chikki noticed him. He was pleasantly surprised by Chikki's concentration. He felt touched and grateful that Chikki, swallowing all her agitation and grief, was absorbed in cooking for the guests. He did not say a word, went back to his room and started writing a letter to Margaret.

He began with *Dear Margaret* and wrote a serious and concise letter. It sounded false. Seeing her photograph on the table brought back the pain of losing her. Hair flowing down her cheeks. She had leaned forward slightly to say something naughty. Eyes smiling. Behind her back, the apple tree that was in the backyard of their flat. He himself had taken this photo. She had rejected him under that very apple tree. She had now rejected him again, at the very moment of his planned action.

Margaret wanted freedom to be distinct. Simultaneously she wanted to be his girl. He too wished her to be free to be herself, while remaining his woman. Love could not be complete without his possessing her. But it could not last without Margaret's possessing a separate identity. Contradictory — Yes, but true. That was why being in love was a torture. He started with *Darling* and wrote another letter, sounding high-minded in pardoning her. It too seemed to be a clever trick to rob her of her freedom and make her feel guilty. The difficulty was to be able to open up without any pretense, while in a state of anguish.

He tore it up. Wrote again:

Dearest Margaret, while my nobility has suffered defeat, spite, meanness and intensity have won. You have thus again subjected my

nobility to a test. I will try to understand my defeat. Because your personality is meaningful to me, I'll try to understand why you rejected me and wanted him. There is no need for pity. A time may yet come when you will really want me. For that moment, I will wait, unbroken, solid and substantial.

—Jagan

Jagannatha read it again. Why had he not mentioned Chandrashekar by name? Because it was torment to write his name. But to view his rival as a nameless creature was mean. He revised the letter here and there. He used the name "Chandar" that Margaret did, to convey her intimacy with Chandrashekar. When he wrote this, he once again visualized the naked lovers together and felt tormented. He thought he had overcome his anguish and read the letter again. However, this revision, by suggesting that he was not jealous of Chandrashekar, had let his false nobility sneak in.

But he did not think he had another way. At the end of the letter, he wrote that he was venturing into the hutments of the untouchables that evening. He then walked straight to the post box and mailed the letter.

When all had assembled for lunch, he said, "I won't speak today. You carry on." Neelakantaswamy was shocked. He said, "No, No, you should not withdraw like that." Jagannatha explained, "No question of stepping back. I just have other plans." Ananthakrishna joined in, "We should make high caste people love the untouchables. That's what Gandhi wants. If you talk, people may respond". Jagannatha was very clear in his mind. He said, "That's not my purpose. The most important thing is to make the untouchables rebel. They should first become individuals for that. That's why I have concluded that talking is of no use." Rao did not take part in the discussion. After lunch Jagannatha persuaded Neelakantaswamy to accept his suggestion, "You do your propaganda. Please don't misunderstand me. I have some other plans, more important than speech-making." But Ranga Rao persisted, "People are sure to gather to hear you speak."

They all left again to spread the message. Jagannatha went to his room and wrote in his notebook: *One should be solid to*

act resolutely; at the same time, one should remain soft enough to respond to pain and pleasure. I should understand the significance of Nagamani's death.

A generous feeling was blossoming inside Jagannatha. So, he wrote in the notebook: *People like Chikki understand the untouchables in a certain way. She knows all kinds of details about their lives. Who was pregnant, who had relations with whom, how many children this woman has, how many had died.* But he was trying to understand the untouchables through another kind of relationship that was even deeper. For that, Manjunatha, Jagannatha's memories, the ringing bells of the temple—he had to destroy all of these and he would, he would dare to become completely alienated. He would gain by losing himself. The untouchables too would learn to gain and lose. He would enhance his own freedom by extending the freedom of the lowliest people, He would regain Margaret by creating a new reality.

Rao came upto him in a hurry. Jagannatha looked at him quizzically. Rao said, "Do you know who made the workers quit?" He began chewing betel leaves and nuts and described Prabhu's conspiracies, "You face danger from this Prabhu." After sounding this warning to Jagannatha, he went off to chat with Ananthakrishna.

Jagannatha waited for the evening. He knew that no untouchable would go to the meeting. He washed his face, wore fresh clothes, combed his hair and in a pleasant frame of mind, walked towards the untouchable ghetto. He remembered what his mother used to say. The untouchables drove out Brahmins who came into their huts. They were afraid that they would be ruined by the entry of Brahmins. Jagannatha felt some trepidation.

He walked, all the while watching the thatched huts on the hill. He perspired as he thought of the moment when he would stand inside one of the huts and the consternation it would cause among the untouchables. But it was inevitable for him to face whatever was in store. Holding himself erect he walked straight towards the hutments. No one was visible. An untouchable woman in her backyard was placing a huge earthen pot on three stones arranged in the shape of a triangle to serve as a furnace. It must be to heat water for a bath. Some

children naked in the evening cold with runny noses, were playing.

"Pilla," Jagannatha called out standing in front of a hut. Whose hut was it? Whose gudi was it? Gudi also meant temple. Strange irony. "Pilla," he called out again, turned back and looked.

The untouchables had popped up from here, there, everywhere. Unkempt hair. Naked bodies except for just a loin cloth. Standing as if petrified, like carved black stone statues!

Jagannatha, trying to smile, asked, "Is Pilla here?" No answer. He was scared.

"I have a little work with him. So, I have come to see him."

His smooth words seemed to frighten them even more. No one moved. Only children, unmindful of all this, kept on playing. The sun was setting. The whole situation, without a single sound, was unnatural. Jagannatha could not bear the sight of untouchable men standing about, staring at him. He asked authoritatively.

"Why are you staring at me like that? Tell me where Pilla is." Pilla returned just then. Wearing white, limping slightly, Pilla hurried to Jagannatha. He too seemed afraid. Yet he said,

"Come master, please sit down." Pilla headed straight to his hut. Jagannatha, feeling that he had won this battle, walked with him. Pilla opened the door made of palm fronds and asked the master to come in. Jagannatha was surprised to find the situation turning out to be even better than he had desired.

A few baskets hanging from the loft, a couple of earthen pots—there was nothing else in Pilla's hut. But the floor, scrubbed clean, was shining. Pilla was uneasy about not being able to offer Jagannatha something to sit on, but Jagannatha told him not to worry and sat on the floor. The untouchables, who were standing at a distance till now, surrounded Pilla's hut. An elder among them came in and told Jagannatha in a trembling voice, "Master, you should not come into our huts like this." Jagannatha asked Pilla to explain. Pilla tried. He told them that the master felt that they were not untouchables. They could touch others and they could be touched by others. No one seemed to comprehend him.

"Where are the other young men?," asked Jagannatha.

"They will come now, master." Jagannatha felt good that Pilla was speaking naturally with him.

"Pilla, none of you should be afraid. You should all walk straight with me. You should get angry and fight. You should say that you are not pigs but human beings. Do you understand?" Jagannatha wanted to say many more things but decided to hold them back for now, and put his hand over Pilla's shoulder.

"Where is your father?" Pilla pointed at his father who was standing at a distance in a corner.

A smiling Jagannatha told Pilla's father, "We will get your son married next month." The untouchables still seemed to be in a daze. Jagannatha thought this was just the beginning and things would improve in the near future.

He told Pilla, "Tell the other boys that I had come here" and started for his home. Pilla limped along with Jagannatha to the house.

Jagannatha was feeling very good when he came home. Any change brought fear to people—to him, to the untouchables. The surest way to tame the bull of fear was to seize it by its horn. Ananthakrishna, Ranga Rao and Neelakantaswamy had come back after their speech-making. They were discussing what they had said. Rao told Ananthakrishna, "You spoke well." Neelakantaswamy said, "But I don't accept the Sarvodaya politics based on persuasion," and argued his case very rationally. Jagannatha too joined in. When the question of caste came up, Jagannatha remarked.

"The Lingayats have about fifty percent right to play caste politics because there are still some backward people among them. We may say that Vokkaligas have about seventy percent right. Brahmins have no right at all. By the same token, the untouchables have a hundred percent right. But the tragedy is that they are not aware of it. So, Brahmins, Lingayats and Vokkaligas turn out to be casteist as they fight over jobs and things."

Neelakantaswamy supported Jagannatha's stand. Ranga Rao argued that class consciousness was better than caste

consciousness. Ananthakrishna held the view that without love, nothing of value occurred. Adiga, who was listening eagerly to all this, raised his rear end and passed wind. He muttered to himself, "Damned gas! But, this body craves for gas-producing foods." The Socialists looked down in embarrassment.

Everyone went to sleep after dinner. But Jagannatha paced the yard. In the sky, the great sage, Vashishta and next to him, the untouchable Arundhathi[1]. Jagannatha smiled. Stars shining, sharp like needle points on the eve of New Moon Day. Jagannatha's mind blossomed in delight. He went in and opened the door to Chikki's room. She was sleeping with just a saree for cover, and the lamp was still lit. "Why don't you use a blanket? Isn't it cold?" So saying, Jagannatha took the rug from the bench and tried to cover Chikki with it. "Ayyo, not for me. Why do I need that?" said Chikki, shedding crocodile tears. Smiling, Jagannatha spread the rug over her. He lowered the lamp light. Chikki was happy. Suppose mother were alive or he had a sister of marriageable age, perhaps this revolution would have been impossible. What if he were a member of the middle class?

Jagannatha went to his room, turned down the lantern light and lay down. As his body was warm, he did not need anything except the shawl. The pure woollen shawl which mother had brought for him years ago. Snuff-coloured and smooth. After twenty years of use, it had worn thin. He had personally patched up the tears in it. Margaret had done two patches. even though she used to make fun of his attachment to it. After father died, mother had gone on a pilgrimage for ten months and bought this shawl in Kashi. As a boy, Jagannatha used to sleep under it, folding his legs at the knees, lying on his side his hands between his thighs. He did it even now. He needed to lie down in this posture to sleep well. Margaret used to make fun of this, calling him a baby in the womb. She used to complain that Jagannatha, by sleeping this way, occupied too much space for two to sleep comfortably in the same bed. She would break into laughter as she pulled at his arms and straightened his body. Even when

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[1] Vashishta married Arundhathi, a Shudra/low-caste woman, a symbol of chastity.

she straightened his legs and held them that way by interlocking her feet with his, his legs would fold back automatically as sleep overcame him. He would say "Please" to her, embrace her, fondle her, kiss her, and winning her over, fold his knees again and fall asleep. As he was trying to sleep now, he felt suddenly the pain of separation. After a while, he dozed off. Hearing shots and screams in the middle of deep sleep, he got up and ran down to the yard. Others were there before him.

TWENTY-ONE

The hilltop was raging with fire! Just outside in Jagannatha's front yard stood weeping the untouchables. The servants brought all the available lamps and lit them — gaslight, lantern and bed lamp. Where was he? Was it in his sleep? Was it a dream? Jagannatha was perplexed. He heard Chikki saying to Adiga, "All this is because they touched the shaligrama."

Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao were actively trying to bring things under control. Ranga Rao brought an earthen pot full of honey and started applying it to burn wounds. Older untouchables groaned. Neelakantaswamy ran around, scolding, advising and comforting the victims. Ananthakrishna and a socialist youth went to fetch a doctor. Jagannatha located Pilla and asked him, "What happened?"

The untouchables' huts caught fire when they were asleep. Pilla had run out screaming. He woke everyone up and got them out. As they all rushed out, some received burns.

Jagannatha could not find any comforting words to say to the untouchables who looked at him with distraught eyes. He took Neelakantaswamy to a corner and asked, "Did any one die?"

"It seems a boy is dead. But don't say anything till the doctor comes." Having said that, Neelakantaswamy lit a cigarette. And said, "I knew that there would be this kind of violence." He then went to console the untouchables. Jagannatha joined him and helped others in applying honey to their burns. A socialist boy was describing how they cut off the fingers of an

untouchable in some town. An untouchable woman was loudly lamenting, "Where will we sleep? Where shall we live? Where can we go?" Jagannatha tried to reassure her but failed and so he scolded her.

What did he have to do immediately? It was still dark. They had to wait for a while before daybreak. These people needed a roof over their heads. They could not possibly sleep under the cold sky. Other untouchables would not let them come close. So, he told Neelakantaswamy that he should take them all to a big hall, adjacent to their house, which was being used to peel arecanuts.

But the untouchables hesitated to go in. Neelakantaswamy's gentle persuasion did not work. Jagannatha had to shout at them. Chikki went into the house to avoid impeding what was going on.

The parents of the dead boy however remained outside; they sat in front of their child. They simply would not get up nor did they respond to Neelakantaswamy's words that the doctor would come and take care of their boy and that they too should go in. The dead boy had blisters all over his body. His face was disfigured by burns. But still, his parents hoped that he was alive. The father told him how the boy received such severe burns.

When the fire broke out, this boy was sitting on the loft. There was a bunch of bananas up there which the boy fancied. He would not listen to any advice, poor soul! The fire that had caught the roof hit him right in the face. Only when the roof caved in with a thud did they realize that their hut was on fire.

Jagannatha tried to tell them as gently as he could that their boy was dead.

"Look here, your boy..." Jagannatha could not guess immediately why the mother got up alarmed. She said, sobbing, "Master, that bunch of bananas was not stolen from your farm. I had been to my mother's house last week. She gave me that bunch. I had kept it in the loft to ripen it. If you want, master, I'll swear by Bhootharaya, it was not stolen from your farm." Jagannatha found her low self-esteem disgusting. He was enraged that she thought he was about to bring up the matter of bananas. He said, "Your son is dead."

The parents began to scream the minute Jagannatha told them this harsh truth. All the untouchables came out. Perhaps

they found being in this house as difficult as being in their burning huts. Jagannatha's appeal to them to go inside and his anger, both proved futile. The whole group surrounded the body and sobbed. Jagannatha decided to let them cry if they wanted to and stood in a corner under a tree. The doctor brought some ointment and waited for the victims while he spoke to Ananthakrishna. Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao searched for the worst-hit among them and took them to the doctor. Pilla saw Jagannatha standing alone and came up to him. Adiga came too. Both stood silent. Jagannatha could not stand their silence.

"You believe all this happened because they touched the shaligrama, don't you?" Having thrown this accusation at Adiga, Jagannatha looked at Pilla, standing at some distance in the dark.

Adiga did not respond. Jagannatha persisted, "Speak up. Why are you silent?"

"Jaganna, this is no time for anger."

Adiga's hypocritical gentleness bothered Jagannatha, so he said, "Answer my question, Adigare, I wonder how minds like yours work."

"Jaganna, isn't it true that the shaligrama incident is indirectly the cause of this? If you had not put your hand to this wheel to set it in motion, everything would have remained in its place. Isn't that right?"

Jagannatha burned in anger as he listened to Adiga's tranquil voice. He said, "Aren't you ashamed to speak Advaitha[1] at this moment? "

Adiga replied, "That a child died while eating bananas should make you sad, not angry."

Jagannatha retorted, "What if a Brahmin boy had died?" Adiga said coolly, "Jaganna, no arguments, please. Think of your immediate responsibilities." Jagannatha could not contain himself.

"Your mysticism, asceticism, spirituality, your Shankaracharya — everything is a ploy to uphold the existing system. That's all."

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[1] monism, an extremely intellectual form of worship profounded by Shankaracharya the head of a mutt or mission.

"Jaganna, your anger is making you false. Nothing else."

The hiss of gas lights burning in the dark and the wailing of the untouchables combined to make the house on the hill look like a burning ghat.

Adiga told Jagannatha, "Jaganna, you are looking at what you should see with wide open eyes. Your mind is distraught right now."

Jagannatha did not speak. He took a look at Pilla to find out what he might be thinking at this moment. Adiga continued in the same quiet tone, "A holy man in Dakshineshwar[1] was telling me: what happens if you pounce on a man who is leaping at you? You get hurt. Instead, if you jump in the same direction that he does and step aside, he will stumble and fall flat on his face. This is the secret of motion. The untouchables had come to terms with their conditions and lived their lives quietly. They went on adjusting themselves to their environment. They said, in effect, "If you don't touch us, we won't touch you!" They thus learned to tolerate their situation. It is of course greater to watch in an involved way than to make adjustments to the situation. If one sees the world this way, everything appears to be a ploy—this fire, this violence, you, who have put your hand on the wheel to turn it—all things are ploys.

Who knew how many centuries of conspiracy were behind Adiga's way of thinking! Jagannatha was really put off. He asked exasperatedly, "Adigare, do you ever get angry? Don't you feel that the man behind this fire is a despicable worm? It might be Prabhu or Shetty. Whoever it is, tell me, why do you never get angry? Why don't you see that the caste system has diminished your very humanity? Why is it that only when the untouchables receive your kicks in silence, they become fit for your love? Why don't you think that all this is filthy? Your Shankaracharya, your Madhvacharya, your Paramahamsa, your Ramana Maharshi[2]."... All of them are just like you—incomplete beings."

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[1] a place of pilgrimage in Bengal where Kāli is the presiding deity; also associated with Ramakrishna Paramahamsa who was called the "Saint of Dakshineshwar."

[2] a saint who stressed the quest for "self" and believed that truth cannot be either taught or learnt; but has to be experienced and realised.

Without any anger Adiga said, "Who am I? Forget me, I am nobody! Just to survive, I wear this costume. When I get angry, I beat my wife. That's me. What right have I to speak of anything? But yet, I wonder why *your* anger is not burning like camphor or smouldering but smoky like the fire at the end of a piece of wet wood. That's important."

Jagannatha was bewildered for a moment. He then decided that this kind of thinking would inevitably make him inward-looking and inert. He went to Pilla while Adiga went to where Ananthakrishna was sitting.

Jagannatha was disappointed to see the way the untouchables lamented their loss. There was in it as much genuine grief as a desire for sympathy. He wondered whether he would ever be able to love.

Neelakantaswamy invited him to discuss the crisis and seemed to be in a hurry. Jagannatha disliked the secretive tone of their meeting. Neelakantaswamy, when he came close to whisper something to him might be tugging and pulling at his hair in the dark. He said, "Sir, we have to make this into an issue. I will go straight to Shimoga and send the press a telegram. It will make front-page news. I'll take the photographs myself—it seems that the dead boy's name is Chouda. We should make Chouda the hero of our campaign."

Jagannatha thought that dealing with Neelakantaswamy, who was so eager for action without any scruples, was immoral. It seemed as if they were all perpetrating some injustice, as if they were ignoring an important truth in this context. But Neelakantaswamy kept on whispering intently, thus preventing Jagannatha from thinking clearly.

"Our enemies have no such subtleties. They use fire. They kill. They threaten. We can't sit back with folded hands. We have to disturb people's conscience. For that, we should use the newspapers, radio—whatever we can."

Yes, that was true Jaganatha thought. But what about the disfigured dead boy? What about his own responsibility to the weeping helpless untouchables? He needed silence and solitude to absorb all of these into his inner self, ponder over them carefully and allow that process to create pure action. But he had lost his solitude for good. He had become unfit for the

cosy comfort of lying down, covering himself with his shawl and rotating on his own axis contentedly. Should he assent to Neelakantaswamy's manipulation of the dead untouchable boy? Or should he deny it and meditate with Adiga on the verandah? The wailing of the bereaved mother was excruciating. He agreed to Neelakantaswamy's suggestion.

Neelakantaswamy ran upstairs and brought his camera. Ranga Rao brought all the gaslights and placed them around the untouchables. A part of the yard blossomed in the artificial light in the surrounding darkness. Loin-cloth clad untouchables in this light. Their hair like dark bushes. Neelakantaswamy kept capturing this distortion, this suffering in the glaring flashlight of the camera from various strategic angles. He ran around. He lured the untouchables into sitting in different postures, waited for them to weep and clicked the camera at precise moments. He told Jagannatha, "Tell me where Chouda has burn wounds. I have to have the details."

When Jagannatha was checking Chouda's body, Neelakantaswamy waited for Jagannatha's face to become distressed and clicked just in time. Jagannatha felt dirty as soon as the flash went off. Seeing that Jagannatha was upset, Neelakantaswamy said in a friendly way, "That too is necessary."

Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao took the car to Shimoga. Ananthakrishna praised them both, "Neelakantaswamy will surely win the next election. His constituency, Nanjangud, has a sizable untouchable population."

The minute he came, Sripathi Rao arranged for the disposal of the corpse. He listed the things needed to build new huts the next day. There was enough bamboo and wood in Jagannatha's house. Using dry grass for roofing could be dangerous. They had to buy zinc sheets from that scoundrel, Prabhu. Sripathi Rao said, "Notice how Prabhu comes out a winner somehow. He got the fire going and would be selling his zinc sheets. Even if you think of getting them from Shimoga, you will have to use his lorry service. In any case, whether it was he or Shetty who masterminded the fire, the boy is a dead boy!"

Jagannatha was sitting on the verandah listening to Rao. Adiga who was with Ananthakrishna said gently, "You see, your politicians are a strange lot. Look at your Neelakantaswamy ..."

Jagannatha felt hurt. He said, "Adigare, behind your spirituality lies a temple, there also lies money and people who kill innocent children in the dead of night. Likewise, behind me are people who play dirty politics. Do you know what I think, in the midst of all this? What Neelakantaswamy is doing now with his camera is much more meaningful than your otherworldly abstract grief."

Though he had his own doubt about what he said, Jagannatha had triumphed over Adiga for just a minute.

Adiga did not answer. Ananthakrishna spoke about Gandhi's notion of ends and means. Seeing that it was almost daybreak, Adiga picked up a jug to go to the riverside for his New Moon Day bath and attendant rituals. Just before he left, he narrated another of his myriad stories.

"Our society has become bad because of the Brahmin transgression of rules and rituals. A mendicant in Gujarat told me a story about an agrahara[1], occupied by a group of very devout Brahmins. Every house had a fire-pit for religious ceremonies. People ate food — only after sacrificial rituals were completed. The youngest daughter-in-law on her first day in the new house had to get up at night to urinate. Afraid to go into the backyard, she urinated into the sacrificial pit, and telling no one about it, went back to sleep. When the father-in-law got up the next morning he saw a gold nugget! In the fire-pit? He grew agitated. Gold in the sacred fire-pit! Some act of pollution[2] must have taken place. The daughter-in-law was frightened. She prostrated before him and told him about how she had passed urine there. The Brahmin was a good old man. He said that it was all right and searched for some purifying ritual in the Dharmashastra[3]. He found a method to sanctify the fire-pit. When he resumed his normal religious life, a thought struck

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[1] an exclusive settlement of Brahmins in an area in a town or village.
[2] defilement caused when religious taboos are defied.
[3] the body or code of Hindu law. The most famous is that of Manu.

him. Well, there was a cleansing ritual after all. So, he called his daughter-in-law and told her, 'Urinate into the fire-pit tomorrow as well.' And she did. The next door Brahmin got wind of this. He told his daughter-in-law, 'There is an established religious way of getting rid of pollution, so you too urinate in our fire-pit.' This way, it spread from house to house and all the Brahmins in the Agrahara started this business. But one poor devout Brahmin refused to do it. He did not bow to his wife's pressure. One day, he chose to move out of the agrahara rather than do what others were doing. The minute he vacated his house, his neighbour thought, if one fire-pit gives out one golden nugget, why should I not buy the next-door house and get two? And thus become the richest man in the neighbourhood? Well, a bitter conflict arose among the inhabitants of the agrahara as everyone wanted to be the richest. Finally, the entire agrahara was burnt to ashes."

Having told the story, Adiga must have wondered about the relevance of his story to the overall situation in Bharathipura. Saying abruptly "I will be back after my bath." he walked away.

Twenty-two

Chikki brought four pots full of gruel, a pile of banana leaf-plates and mango pickles on a leaf to the yard, all of which the untouchables carried off to a corner on the hill. Jagannatha assembled Pilla and his companions and told them. "Look here. Tomorrow we will be entering the temple. What has just happened should not frighten you. I have arranged to build new huts for you with zinc sheet roofs."

He wanted to ask Pilla what he was thinking. But the very word "thinking" was perhaps new to him. However, no other untouchable had become real to Jagannatha. Who was Kariya? Who was Mada? Who was Basya? The only untouchable, other than Pilla, who had become real as a human being to him was the dead boy, Chouda.

He finished his breakfast and set out in the mild sunlight. His body warmed up as he walked. People in all the streets. Some familiar faces, Rao had taken over the responsibility of building the new huts. He could walk around, watch the faces of pilgrims from all over the land who came to pledge their faith. No one seemed to be bothered about his planned step. For centuries, people had bathed in the river in the same manner, everyday. They had heard the same stories and passed them on to their children. The way his mother had told him: "Jamadagni, the sage, was a very short-tempered man. Suspecting his wife of adultery, he told his children to chop up their mother. No one volunteered except Parashurama. He chopped off his mother's head with an axe as he was bound to the principle that he should never disobey his father. But, after all it was his mother. Wasn't a mother's love beyond principles and philosophies? So, when his pleased father granted his son any boon he wanted, he asked for his mother's life. So his mother survived. But the blood stain on his axe would not vanish, even though he washed it in many rivers. Finally, he dipped it in the Tunga river that flowed by Bharathipura. The blood stain vanished. Thus armed he then proceeded to install Lord Manjunatha in Bharathipura in memory of his sin being washed away. The spot where he washed his axe is where thousands of people wash themselves on the morning of the New Moon Day. They walk away cheerfully with the illusion that they have been cleansed." This sin-destroyer, this will, this love beyond principles! Jagannatha who was trying to regain the simple, clear and pure thought that was present at the beginning of his decision-making process, reached the river bank and stood on it.

How many thousands! Old men, children, women. Blanched, tired faces of women who had given birth to too many children. Wet hair dripping water. He used to run behind his mother watching her wet, profuse black hair. Doubt should sprout in the minds of these people. That was it. They should wake up. They should kick God and stand up. The power of Bhootharaya should spring up in the untouchables. They should

become responsible for their own lives. If they were to take that single step, they who had been forever on the outside. . .!

Pilla's first step into the temple would disturb this ancient place of worship that had always lain in hibernation. Ringing small bells and big bells, what had become inert should flex its muscles and move. Chouda's corpse, Pilla's blood, the huts that burned in the fire would carve out a new future.

Jagannatha was happy that nobody had taken notice of him, He began to walk back home. The chariot stood bedecked for the next day's festival. The same thick wet ropes to pull the chariot. Under the same tree stood a man with a performing monkey and a gymnast. Throughout the street, shops were opening their doors. This huge multitude, this commotion — if only a single doubt cracked it open and broke through! Vasu, opening his sweetmeat shop asked Jagannatha, "How are you?"

The earthen stove that Chikki had made must have become dry. She was moistening it with cowdung and drawing rangoli[1] figures on it.

In a corner of the yard, Neelakantaswamy and his friends were making placards. "Let untouchability end right now," "Inquilab Zindabad", "Victory to Mysore Socialist Party," "Farmer's Exploiter Bhootharaya." "Bhootharaya's Exploiter, Manjunatha" etc., Red-letter placards — Ranga Rao was lining them up to dry. Sripathi Rao was supervising the building of new huts.

An untouchable (not one of Jagannatha's men) standing at a respectful distance began "Master." With folded hands he begged, "Because your untouchables are going to the temple, our master will drive us out. Master, you should protect

[1] decorative patterns made with rice flour, either dry or as a paste.

us." While Jagannatha was groping for an answer, Rao spoke up.

"Oh, go away. If your master drives you out, who will carry the excrement in baskets? Especially now at the time of the festival? He might set fire to your huts—that's all, keep watch by turns."

Jagannatha found his answer in what Rao said. He should say that to his untouchables. Their lowliness was their strength. It was their lowliness that made them indispensable to the rest. Refusal to collect and carry the nightsoil out of town! They had the power to spread the stink of faeces all over town and thus destroy the fragrance of scented joss sticks and frankincense that surrounded Manjunatha every day. The thought of it shook Jagannatha. Through the window he saw a mango tree in full bloom. Margaret, foaming beer on the table, the game of intoxicated talk about actualizing human possibilities in facile discussions—from now on, no more of that. All that would be renounced. This cruelty, this dream, this penance that withered the penitent, using all this to discover the strategic points of Bharathipura's reality and crush them—that would be his sole purpose. In the absence of the untouchables, even a mystic's faeces would stink. When this consciousness was born, time would begin to move. As it moved, coal production would go up. As that happened, there would be steel pipes and flush toilets all over the land. The necessity of carrying baskets of excrement on human heads would vanish, the dream of Gandhi[1] and Basavanna[2] would blossom, these dark-skinned untouchable women would wear jasmine flowers in their hair instead of human feces and become seductive and satisfying to Brahmin men with sandalwood paste marks on them. And Brahmin girls would fall for dark broad-chested untouchable men like Pilla.

Jagannatha felt ashamed that he was revelling so fancifully. The most important thing was to know how urgent it was for him to dissolve his self. If he failed to do it, he would not become real and be able to act resolutely. He would be a jelly.

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[1] to show dignity of labour and equality among the classes of people Gandhiji himself carried this waste on his head.

[2] a twelfth-century poet and mystic.

It was because he was still a wandering ghost that he had these nightmares of cruelty. Only then would it be possible for him to be totally involved like a surgeon's knife, and become a loveless, hateless instrument operating within the limits set by the objective.

Renunciation? Till when? Jagannatha pursued another thought. Kapalikas and Shakthas[1] were believed to have sexual intercourse with corpses to gain power. They were supposed to eat the flesh of buried human beings to become ascetics. Ascetics were total revolutionaries. Would he in a sense be forced to follow their path of renunciation? Was it impossible to be a social being and a revolutionary at the same time, as Adiga said? The incongruity of it all was that in order to destroy God's power and glory, one had no choice but to go into this temple.

Ranga Rao brought the mail.

Jagannatha opened a local portal delivery: a long envelope. There was a letter in it, written on both sides of a foolscap size sheet in illegible handwriting. At the top in the centre was the caption, "Manjunatha Prasanna," and in a corner, "Safe and sound." Jagannatha turned it over to see the sender's name but there was no signature. As he was used to reading scrivener Krishnaiah's bad hand, reading this letter was not that difficult. It read:

Town's richest landlord, an erstwhile trustee of Shri Manjunatha temple, the man who adorned Manjunatha with a golden crown that saved his life, the leader entrusted with the burden of protecting the citizens of Bharathipura like a father—Mr. Jagannatha Rao, this is an appeal from a poor man who has been a well-wisher of your family from your father's time. . .

Jagannatha felt bored, folded the letter and was about to tear it up, but attracted by this ornate style, continued to read it.

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[1] necromancers; shamans.

Jagannatha Rayare, this poor man feels very sad to say that you are not likely to be your father's son. Your father was a man of devout faith. Your mother who married him had no intimate relations with him.

We don't know how your father bore it throughout his life. Be that as it may, it is certain that if you were your father's own son, you, belonging to a high class Brahmin family, would not have resorted to such a heinous act. Do you want to know then whose son you are? You are the son of Krishnaiah who was a scrivener in your house. It is no surprise that your mother was sexually intimate with such a low-level Brahmin as Krishnaiah. However, that is irrelevant to us because it strictly concerns the taste of an over-sexed woman. They say that the sin of the sinner visits the one who reports it, but having no other option, I have to speak about your mother's actions. Gopala, who now lives in your house, is your mother's son. I am an eye-witness to that. When you were little, your mother with the scrivener and his family left town under the pretext of a pilgrimage. You know that. Once, when I went to Madras on some business, I saw your pregnant mother. She gave birth to the child there. She named the baby Gopala and claimed that he was born to the ailing Mrs. Krishnaiah during the pilgrimage.

The scrivener's wife, having no child of her own, accepted Gopala as her son without complaint and when she died after a couple of years, your mother continued her sinful relationship, now unimpeded, with Krishnaiah.

My reason for raising these questions is not to malign your father's memory but to warn you that you should clean up your act first before you try to reform the town. The shastras say that it is all right to sacrifice a life to save a town. Therefore, we believe that Manjunatha would forgive us if we have to reveal these facts to save the town from your influence. Repeating that if you were really the son of a devout Brahmin, you would not have engaged yourself in destroying Bharathipura, I end this letter with great sadness. Always your well-wisher.

A resident of Bharathipura.

Jagannatha went down to the yard, not knowing why he did that. Neelakantaswamy was still getting the posters made. Rao was overseeing the supply of bamboo, wood and rope. Jagannatha stood still. Ranga Rao, seeing him this way, asked,

"Sir, aren't you well?" He walked up and looked anxiously at Jagannatha's face. Rao too, alarmed, advised, "Jaganna, go in and lie down," Jagannatha said, "Nothing to worry." Failing to draw Rao's pointed attention, he went back to his room, lay down and closed his eyes. The letter was on the table. Fearing that someone might read it, he tore it up and threw the pieces into the wastepaper basket.

Where was Pilla? He had to tell him about tomorrow. All the clothes were burnt. Fresh ones had to be bought. He came down again and told Rao to buy new clothes for the untouchables. He emphasized—white shirts and white dhotis. Rao told him, "You don't look well. You did not sleep at all yesterday. Sleep for a while."

Jagannatha sat on the verandah, his legs suddenly weak. Seeing him sit alone, Neelakantaswamy joined him. And said, "Ranga Rao has been to town. Mr. Jagannath, it seems no one believes that the untouchables will be able to enter the temple. Bhootharaya will pull them back by their feet." He smiled and lit a cigarette. Jagannatha borrowed a cigarette from him, and lighting it, sat with his eyes closed. He tried to smile at what Neelakanataswamy had said. Then he got up saying, "I have a little work." Neelakantaswamy again suggested, "You don't look well at all, you've lost a lot of sleep; go and get some." He then went back to his poster work. His last line was, "I am getting a big poster done with the caption, 'Change is the dharma[1] of life' "

Jagannatha blamed himself for his stupidity in worrying over a letter from a poisonous worm. Gopala who was combing his hair before a mirror in the central hall, turned to him and smiled affectionately. He said to Jagannatha who was staring at him, "Anna[2], what do you want?" Jagannatha started. What if it were true? Or was it false? Truth or falsehood—there was no one to tell him. Probably, Rao would say, "Not true." Chikki would say the same thing. But, how could he trust them? But then, how could he trust that poisonous creature's letter? There was never ever going to be a clear answer to his question.

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[1] a difficult concept to translate. It has been interpreted as the holy law, or the right thing to do.

[2] a form of addressing elder brothers (menfolk).

Jagannatha went up the staircase without responding to Gopala. He should instruct Pilla about tomorrow. But what? Everything was meaningless. However, that he was anguished was a fact. It was true that he had no choice but to face this turmoil. It was also true that he would revolve this answerless question in his inner being repeatedly, that he would go round and round it, and that he would live looking at his gyrating self till he died.

If there were no doubt, was it possible for him to think this way? He used to sleep next to his mother when he was in middle school. One night, he couldn't fall asleep. Mother got up and started chewing betel leaves and arecanuts with some chunam. She was not supposed to chew this stuff after his father's death. But she carried on. She then got up and went out. He was still awake. Did he wonder then why she had gone out after putting this chewing mixture in her mouth? He couldn't remember. But then, how could he remember that he was awake? She came back to bed after a very long time. Where had she been? Did she go to the bathroom or to Krishnaiah's room that was next to the office? Krishnaiah's wife used to sleep in a room next to the kitchen. She confined herself to dealing with things like milk and ghee. She was actually Krishnaiah's own sister's daughter, his niece. Small eyes, crooked face! Had Chikki been home that night? Yes, in a room, upstairs, the same one she used even now. If Chikki had not a trace of suspicion, the contents of the unsigned letter were false. If she did, she would not have had the respect she did for his mother. Rao too —how great was his respect for his mother! That meant mother did go to the bathroom. But then, she would definitely not go to the bathroom chewing. Had she been perspiring when she returned to lie down next to him? Was her hair messed up?

Jagannatha looked out of the window to stop his mind from getting muddled by anguished thoughts and imaginings. Rao, Neelakantaswamy and Ranga Rao were involved in work. Boys ran around happy. Pilla limped over to Rao. No, there was no solution to his problem. This was a real predicament because it was like going down a bottomless pit endlessly.

Mother used to play dice with Krishnaiah. Chikki would be with them on those occasions. Sakamma, Krishnaiah's wife too would be there. His father had died when Jagannatha was in primary school. Before that, his father used to be present watching the game. However, Jagannatha did not remember his father playing or singing. Krishnaiah used to read *Kumaravyasa Bharatha*[1] beautifully and interpret it. Chikki told him when he was in middle school that his father truly trusted Krishnaiah. Krishnaiah, Sakamma and his mother travelled all over India for about eight or ten months. Then, Chikki was with him. When they returned, Gopala was a little baby. Sakamma used to love the baby. Mother did too. Therefore, the letter-writer's allegations were all lies. That she was in Madras was a blatant lie. The one who claimed that he saw her pregnant in Madras was a despicable worm.

Jagannatha sighed deeply, lay down, stretched his limbs, pleasurably and felt like rolling on the bed. Mother was richer than father. Three fourths of their estate belonged to her. Father was a good farmer. Jagannatha had heard Rao wondering who the real master was — was it his father, who, in his knee-length dhoti, got his workers to do their maximum, or Krishnaiah, who ran around the office wearing a fine Finlay[2]. dhoti and silk shirt.

Jagannatha was surprised that he, who had seen several possibilities in the man-woman relationship in England, was capable of such thoughts about his own mother. Perhaps, many were jealous of Krishnaiah. It was natural. But suspicion was equally natural

Jagannatha again came down in a pleasant frame of mind. He borrowed yet another cigarette from Neelakantaswamy and lit it. He told the latter, "You have given a new dimension to the movement. I am very grateful to you." He was glad to see Neelakantaswamy elated. He gave Ranga Rao money to buy

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[1] Naranappa of Gadag, an epic poet of the 15th century. He wrote ten cantos of the *Mahābhāratha* in six-line stanzas. His *Bharatha* is known for its great popularity and its narrative and poetic power.

[2] the name of a company that specialised in the manufacture of fine, white lengths of cloth, used as dhotis.

clothes for the untouchables. He told him, "Return soon" and walked about the yard, smoking and looking at the posters.

Suddenly, the torment hit him again. He found Neelakantaswamy's hair tugging revolting. That night, mother did not go to the bathroom with the chewing stuff in her mouth. She never went to the toilet with anything at all in her mouth. Was this before mother went on her pilgrimage? Or was it after she came back? What colour saree was she wearing that night? Jagannatha stood under a jack-fruit tree, trying to remember every detail of that night.

Mother got up. She touched him. Why? Did she touch him to make sure that he was asleep? Afterwards, she put the chewing mixture in her mouth. She took it from the same plate that was still being used. No. She started chewing after she came back and before she went to sleep. He used to like the way her mouth smelled when she chewed this stuff. Arecanut, cardamom, clove, chunam, tender betel leaves — the smell of these ingredients being chewed into a viscous mass. No — she chewed only after she came back from the bathroom. Not before. But mother never chewed anything in bed. In fact, she would not let Jagannatha eat anything lying in bed. He used to like to eat kodubales lying down, taking them out one by one from his pocket. But mother used to chastise him for that. She did go every night to Krishnaiah's room. She would go without letting Chikki know anything about it, every single night.

Adiga came back after his bath and worship. He asked Jagannatha pleasantly, "What's going on?" but fell silent when he saw Jagannatha's sullen face. He went straight in. He would now offer worship to the shaligrama. Jagannatha's efforts thus would all come to nothing.

Jagannatha felt as if green snakes were crawling all over him. He should ask Rao. It might ease his pain. Rao of course would laugh at the whole thing as so much fabrication. Jagannatha would be awfully glad. Every nagging thing would step out of his mind. He almost went to Rao. But... He thought again. His revelation about his mother's alleged extramarital sex would only sow suspicion in Rao's mind. He would say that everything was a lie, but he would begin wondering whether there

was any truth in all this. Jagannatha would be doing an enormous injustice to his mother.

He began staring blankly at the jackfruit tree. Some worker had wounded the tree with his axe—the sap had oozed out and the spot was sticky. This tree—it yielded fruit even when it was old. Red segments. Sweet as honey. Father loved farming. Shri Krishnaraja Wodeyar[1], when he had come to pray to Manjunatha, ate jackfruit from this very tree, and being highly impressed, gave his father a medal. He could not remember how his father looked.

He thought about father. But who was his father? When he died, mother cried. Krishnaiah cried. Why did they cry? No. No. Never would he be able to find out whether it was true or false. Mother had given Sakamma, Krishnaiah's wife, a gold chain. She used to wait for Krishnaiah to come by the last bus from Shimoga. Sakamma used to stand with her.

Suddenly, a thought clear and crystalline like a pebble, born out of his anguish, flashed before his mind's eye. He went straight to his room, sat down and wrote in his notebook:

Look at this important aspect. Even I, all set to destroy Manjunatha's power and glory, subject the town's people to distress, and through that, to make them responsible for their own lives, am feeling great pain at the suspicion that my mother might have committed adultery. Why? That's the most important question. I know that there is no way of ridding myself of the suspicion. In that case, why am I struggling to find out whether or not mother was an adulteress? I said it was all right when Pilla made advances to Kaveri. I offered the shaligrama to the untouchables. I have dared to alienate my family from this society. But yet, my anguish over my mother proves that somewhere, sentiments like class, clan, caste and family have remained important for me. That I might not be a legitimate son, that I might be a bastard would not bother me if it were not for the hidden conformist in me.

I, who am leading the untouchable entry into the sacred temple to assault Bharathipurians—why do I stipulate that only the husband, who wedded my mother lawfully with the Fire-God as witness, has

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[1] the erstwhile Maharaja (king) of the Mysore province. A forward looking, progressive ruler who founded the Kannada Sahitya Parishath.

the right to enter my mother's body? When I am so agitated over the possibility of another man's entry into my mother's body, do I have the right to penetrate the mystery of Manjunatha's sanctum sanctorum? I am trying to establish the guilt or innocence of my mother as if my inner being is on fire. Are my hopes for the revolution of the same intensity? When a fire flows through my nerves at picturing someone else caressing the birthmark on her buttock, do I have the right to disrupt the beliefs of the people who have preserved them for ages?

But it is also true that even as I am thinking clearly and concretely, I feel a profound sadness. My intellect says that my feelings are wrong, My feelings trample on my thinking and stand upright. Now, I am on the horns of a dilemma.

Jagannatha stood up after writing that much. His mind was light and he began thinking again. He could not relate to the untouchable mother who pleaded pitifully that the bananas her son Chouda was eating on the sly when the fire struck their hut did not come from Jagannatha's farm, when no one had accused her or her son. These untouchables may get educated eventually, some may become clones of Sathyaprakash, the necessity for carrying others' excrement might disappear, their young ones might don tight pants and L.S.D. might replace Manjunatha. When Jagannatha thought this way, he felt that all change was meaningless. The soothing darkness of Manjunatha's kindness perhaps gave mother some consolation. Perhaps, her life's entire pain filled the melodious passages of her music. For he who had ventured to find life's fulfilment in changing times, daily pain and pleasure would of necessity become inconsequential. He would gradually become a monster chained to a single purpose like some yogi who gathers holy ash even as he puts his finger into a vagina[1].

The same trend of thought continued even when Jagannatha ate with others. Till now, wealth and his family name were his protectors. He had put his hand out to destroy this order. Therefore, now, his ears should be ready to hear whatever

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[1] all the four versions of *Shunya Sampadane* refer to an episode in which Kinnara Bommiah puts Akka Mahadevi to test making amorous advances. Only one of them contains this detail of Bommiah fingering her private parts.

was said. He should be able to get up whenever he heard someone wailing. Perhaps, in the final analysis what Adiga used to say — that only an ascetic could be a true revolutionary — was true!

Ranga Rao said during the meal, "You know why my mother resents inviting Brahmins to eat at our place? She asks, 'Why make them eat here and lose their caste?' "

Adiga who was eating in the kitchen said, "I am eating here because I don't want to hurt my professional work. I have eaten in all kinds of places while on my way to Hrishikesh. Be a Roman while you are in Rome."

Everyone joked and then ate. Jagannatha tried to clarify his thoughts further, after rinsing his hands, and while he strolled in the backyard. There was no point in asking whether he had complete faith in his undertaking because this kind of faith became strong and deep in the process of getting involved. He should face all the obstacles in order to create a society in which his parentage would be insignificant. As long as the conception of one's mother, one's son, one's wife etc. remained the same, there would be caste and wealth. Or was it the other way? As long as wealth and caste existed, there would be mutually diminishing feelings between people. Revolution was the attempt to change the nature of these feelings. He was now ready to enter the struggle fully, aware of what such an involvement entailed. He would open up to see and experience everything that came his way.

He must wait for the birth of a new man within, whose eyes would look upon and comprehend the reality around with compassion, and, at the same, dissect it clinically with a desire to change it for the better; who would passionately love it and still stay detached; understand why there was the caste system and realise that he too was not above it but would transcend it in his actions and walk with his head held high. With that birth, Jagannatha would be able both to embrace the world and renounce it, grow gradually into a concrete form, walk the path of cruelty, violence and greed and still stay unaffected, reduce Manjunatha into a cipher and unload the baskets of human excrement from the untouchables' heads. An Indian would

attain real dignity only when it became possible for a Brahmin boy to desire a dark-skinned untouchable girl with flowers in her hair, only when a Brahmin girl longed to be hugged by coarse-haired and dark-skinned untouchable boy. The shudras' Bootharaya stood over the untouchables' Bootharaya, and over him, Manjunatha with Jagannatha's crown on his head. In Adiga's eyes, his sparkle and in his worship, mother's wet hair. Under his aegis, adultery, birth, death, sex, children and baskets with human excrement. Must reclaim from Him everything He has taken over, manifesting Himself as crops, brass, milk-filled breasts, the heat of the loins and the electric current lighting the lamp.

He would thus conquer his anguish about who had fathered him. Tomorrow, he, with the untouchable youth, would sow a new truth that had not yet become a reality between Time's thighs, and wait.

Rao, who was applying chunam to tobacco, stopped Jagannatha who was on his way to Pilla.

"I'll talk to the untouchables today. You don't look well so go and rest."

Jagannatha paused, absorbed in his own thoughts and then said, "Rayare, tomorrow, all that I expect may not emerge. The entry into the temple may not be everything I expect it to be. But I believe the struggle for justice will have begun. Time has started moving. I should tell you what I have decided. I will gradually hand over the estate management to Gopala. It is a burden for me. The untouchables call me "Master" because of that. I want to mobilize people to fight against inhumanity. I want to unify the landless farmers for instance. They should be made to shed their fear of Bhootharaya and stop paying whatever tenancy money the landlords demand. For that to happen, they have to be mobilized. I have to learn to wait knowing that nothing happens in a big dramatic way."

Rao, chewing tobacco and smiling, said, "I wanted to tell you something. Nothing may come of any action—it is in the nature of this soil. However, I have decided to join the untouchables in their march into the temple."

Rao, seeing tears of gratitude in Jagannatha's eyes said, "My dear friend, that doesn't mean I agree with everything you say.

But, when you have girded up your loins to fight, if I step back timidly, I will be ashamed for the rest of my life. Mine is just a ploy to save my own face. That's all."

Exhausted, Jagannatha slept.

TWENTY-FOUR

The chief priest of Shri Manjunatha temple, Seetharamaiah, walking swiftly and muttering some slokas[1] reached his house in an alley behind the temple. His cousin, Nagaraja Jois, had become arrogant these days. He had threatened to go to court about the right to priesthood. Prabhu's nephew, Venkataraya Kamath, had whispered the news to Seetharamaiah when he was walking home after the temple service. Seetharamaiah was frightened. Kamath had said, "Tell me, Seetharamaiah, why has Jois not yet taken the case to court? Isn't it because of his fear of Bhootharaya? If Jagannatha Rao destroys that fear, how can we make people remain righteous? You know how Jois' mind works. Besides, isn't his son a lawyer? When he came to the store, Jois said, 'Let the untouchables enter the temple tomorrow — I'll see what purity will be left in Seetharamaiah's priesthood. I will go to court for sure.' I told my uncle this step of Jagannatha Rao's is like giving the monkey a ladder."

Seetharamaiah did not let Kamath see how frightened he was. He had simply said, "There is a death in the family. God will take care of everything," and had come home.

Seetharamaiah looked impressive. Diamond earrings flashed, a full-length tuft of grey hair hung down his back, a necklace of gold beads gleamed round his neck. Manjunatha's special prasada, vermilion mixed with musk, marked his forehead.

If Ganesha, who was reading the novel *Devadasa* sitting by a window in a corner of the inner room, had heard his father's footsteps, he would have hidden the book. He would have pretended to be busy making leaf-cups or cutting banana leaves.

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[1] verses in Sanskrit.

But he was so absorbed in the novel that he did not hear his father come in. He did not see him standing by him. He did not realize that his father was staring at him. After his father slapped him a couple of times, pounded his head, grabbed the book, threw it aside and pulled him by his shoulder, Ganesha stood up hissing. But because of his stammer, he could not even verbalize the fury that made him feel like bludgeoning his father to death. He showed it in his eyes. How rudely this monster facing him had gobbled up the gentleness that *Devadasa* had instilled in him. Tears flowed from Ganesha's eyes involuntarily because his father had brought him back to vile reality from the fictional world, in which he interacted with the story's characters.

His father's catalogue of curses began with the usual phrase, "lazy lubber." "Do you have any shame? Wasting your life on novels? Is it enough to grow fat eating? How come you haven't got sense even after marriage?" In the midst of a multitude of curses, he slapped his son now and then like a devotee throwing bilva flowers one by one at the linga. Ganesha's rage grew as the blows and curses rained down on him. He waited for the inevitable end of the assault, expecting his hand to rise any moment now to swing out at his father, to break his protruding teeth as they moved while he harangued him. And then, everything would be at peace. As his ears registered the roar of his father's verbal flood, he was hoping that the indifference of his wife, who just peeped in and disappeared, would push him past the limit. Just then Subraya Adiga entered to interrupt the proceedings. "Well, well, Seetharamaiah, you seem to have become Rudra[1] the Lord of tempests." As Adiga said this, Seetharamaiah's anger turned into crocodile tears..

He said, "Adigare, how long can I slog for this family? This rascal son of mine spends all his time with a pornographic book in hand. Even marriage has not brought him a sense of responsibility. What can I do?"

Ganesha began to think. His father's tale of woe would go on for what might seem to be forever. Eventually, even that would end. Father would get hungry. It would be time for Ganesha's afternoon bath. He had a cold bath in the river each

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[1] Lord Shiva in His destructive form.

morning. He would be able to have a hot-water bath at home in the afternoon. If father were not there, he could close the bathroom door and stand stark naked. Pour hot water on his naked body to his heart's content. Ganesha started making leaf-cups out of banana leaves dried over live coal.

Adiga said in a low voice. "Seetharamaiah, I too have a grown-up son. He doesn't listen. But its no use beating him. If you thrash Ganesha this way, he might go crazy."

"Well, he is supposed to succeed me as the chief priest after my death. If he behaves this way, what can I do? I am not saying this for nothing. I feel weak these days. I have been officiating as a priest at marriages, sacred-thread ceremonies etc., all my life, all by myself. This scoundrel has no sense of the sacred and the profane..."

Ganesha tried to forget his humiliation by folding dried banana leaves into cups, securing them on both sides by sticking splinters and piling them neatly one on top of the other. His father's speeches invariably referred to this business of his being the heir to priesthood at the temple. Seetharamaiah had actually married his second wife, after the death of Ganesha's mother, to make sure that his heir had a woman to look after him. A woman slightly older than Ganesha — it was no fault of Ganesha that her two children were female. Worse, the girl Ganesha married was the daughter of his step-mother's brother. Reason, according to his father — what sort of girl did Ganesha want? A devoted Brahmin girl who knew how to ensure the performance of priestly procedures or a girl who parted her hair on the side and went to the movies like those fashionable Konkani girls?

Bharathipura did not have a hideout where Ganesha could smoke a beedi in secret. Once, he was caught smoking by a servant who privately reported it to someone else. But it soon became news in town and when his father heard of it, he had given Ganesha such a severe beating that it had left welts on his back.

The heir to the chief priesthood of Manjunatha temple — why did he need an English education? Why does he need novels? Why films? Why a loving wife? Why shirts with collars? Why slippers? — Ganesha's wife Yamuna slept with his stepmother. Depending on the sacredness of the week and the

day, Yamuna would sleep with him on a few chosen days in a month. But he, who got beaten up daily right in front of his wife, who was aware of his father's presence just a few feet away and thought that his father might get up any time and ill-treat him, how could he do anything to the woman who slept next to him, stiff and tight? The sexual descriptions in the novel, *Natasarvabhouma*[1] were merely grist for the world he imagined while masturbating.

Yamuna brought some more dried banana leaves — dried banana leaf scent forever in his nose! Now that his father was not screaming, Ganesha's attention turned to Jagannatha Rao who so resembled the heroic characters of fiction.

"Do you think any son born to his father will resort to such a heinous act? Everywhere now, hatred of Brahmins. The Amildar is a Brahmin-hater. So is the District Commissioner. The cabinet of ministers too is anti-Brahmin. To crown it all, this former chief trustee of the temple has turned out to be a Brahmin-hater..."

Just as Ganesha expected, Seetharamaiah began his non-stop lecture on Brahminism. He continued, "What does the Vedanta say?

One is born a Shudra
One's karma makes him a twice-born of the top three tiers
One's reading of the Vedas makes him a Vipra.
One's knowledge of the Brahman makes him a Brahmana.

"I tell Ganesha: 'Young fellow, you read all kinds of pornographic books. What can these Kannada writers write about sex? Have you seen anything to match some of the verses in *Lalitha Sahasranama*[2] for their description of the female anatomy? Adigare, what a description! To put it in short, it is now the Age of Kali[3]. Otherwise, how could a well-born Brahmin son think of taking the beef-eating[4] untouchables into the temple, forgetting that Manjunatha's crown saved his life? Do I have to

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[1] a Kannada novel by A.N. Krishna Rao.
[2] the thousand names of the Divine Mother.
[3] the last and worst "ages" of Hindu cosmology. Full of conflict,. sorrow, and deprivation.
[4] beef-eating is taboo to all caste Hindus.

tell you anything at all? You know the strict ritual of installing God's idol in a temple. Let me tell you—Jagannatha may jump up and down, but the entry of untouchables into this temple is impossible! How many millions of years has this been in existence! They say, barring Kashi, there is no place of worship as scared as this. They consecrate a temple with a divine idol saying, for a hundred years, for thousand years, for a million years... for ever and ever, Parashurama installed Manjunatha for eternity. Manjunatha was consecrated after the completion of all the necessary immersion in several mediums—of grain, curds, milk and water. There has been no mortal capable of destroying Him nor will there be one!"

Ganesha's father's protruding teeth touched his lips and trembled at every word. His diamond ear-rings flashed. Adiga simply said, "I have to go" and left. Ganesha was frightened again. What if his father went after him again because some leaf-cup was bent or the sandalwood paste was not enough or because Seetharamaiah wanted to know which prostitute's son had given him the dirty book. With a towel on his shoulder and another round his waist, Ganesha got up in a hurry and went into the bathroom. His father's assertion that no mortal capable of destroying Manjunatha had been born and never would be, stuck in Ganesha's mind. He moved to close the bathroom door, disrobed completely and stood before the fire. Father used to scold him if he did not have the loin cloth even in bed. Ganesha applied the coconut oil that was in a niche on the wall between his thighs and poured it all over his body and enjoyed himself before the fire.

He heard his father's roar outside. Perhaps his stepmother had complained. His father shouted, "What are you doing with the door shut? Are you bathing like a Muslim without the loin cloth?"

Ganesha could remove the loin cloth twice a day—when he was in the lavatory and in the bathroom, but his father would scream even during these private moments. He started pouring hot water over his body. He felt supreme joy as the hot water descended slowly, reaching all the sensitive parts of his body. He had heard that the pleasure-loving Ravana[1] had asked

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[1] Rama's enemy who abducted Sita and was later slain, in the epic *Ramayana*.

God to grant him itches to scratch while he had a hot bath. Ganesha rubbed his whole oiled body with soap powder, removing the golden thread girdle made from the gold donated by Jagannatha's family for Manjunatha's crown. The same crown had been the source for his stepmother's earrings, his wife's necklace, earrings for his two step-sisters and Seetharamaiah's necklace of beads.

Ganesha, making a noise with the water jug, laughed thinking about the belief that the town would be burnt down if Manjunatha were to be profaned. Rubbish! Was he not by himself in Manjunatha's sanctum sanctorum when his father was away working as a priest at a wedding or some such ceremony? Could he not get up early morning and go to the sanctum sanctorum, close its door if he wanted to, and sit inside? The only other time he could be alone was when he went to the hill to relieve himself. Ganesha had vented all his rage against his father on Manjunatha by profaning Him, doing a variety of unsanctioned acts in the holy place. His body trembled as he remembered one such act. The incident involved Ganesha's seeing only the mute lingam of Manjunatha in the semidarkness of the eternal lamp. He muttered gleefully to himself "Bastard!" poured water swiftly over his body, finished his bath and stood before the fire drying himself. He enjoyed looking at the colours of the flame produced by the burning of dry coconut shells.

Father's cry, "Haven't you finished yet?" And the noise of chopping and frying of vegetables by his stepmother and wife Yamuna. Ganesha took his time drying himself and came out.

His stepmother must have been telling his father, pausing occasionally from paring vegetables, many things about Ganesha's nude bathing. His father's ranting had begun again. He was enquiring how the novel *Devadasa* with Jagannatha's name in it had come into Ganesha's possession. He made as if to beat his son again but desisted when he realized that Ganesha was in a state of madi.[1] He then entered the bathroom to attain the same state.

Ganesha, lying awake at night, thought for a long time. Manjunatha would not let him go anywhere. He was submerged in Manjunatha's prasada. In the sanctum sanctorum, the smell

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[1] a state of ritual purity, after a bath and before worship.

of camphor mixed with the mouldy smell of oil, the smell of vermilion. The same smell at home too. The smell of Bengal gram, swollen in water, offered to Manjunatha. He would eat that stuff whenever he was hungry. Then coconuts—mounds and mounds of their fragments every day. Free coconuts in excess. No eatable was without a large portion of coconut. In curry, in boiled or fried vegetables, in chutney, in salads. Ganesha had never tasted in his entire life potato-onion curry[1], potato bondas[2] or masala dosas[3]. The pleasure of eating them lay only in the novels of A.N. Krishna Rao.

What if Jagannatha Rao lost and the untouchables refused to enter the temple? His father, Seetahramaiah, would win. After his death, Manjunatha would pulverize him like an oil mill. His lot would remain the same until his death. His stepmother would go on blaming him for not producing a son. The same Bengal gram, the same coconut. The same vermilion, the same worship by waving a burning lamp before Manjunatha. Ganesha, under the blanket, legs folded, shook in disgust. He felt like throwing up.

Very secretly, he removed his loin cloth. His father was sleeping in one corner. Perhaps, he would guess what Ganesha was up to. In the dining room, his stepmother, Yamuna, and the children lay sleeping. Tomorrow, the badgering and beating would resume. Yamuna, watching everything, would get absorbed in her work. She would check the almanac for a propitious week and day to come and lie next to him. But his father would be there close by, snoring away. Ganesha would hold back his intense desire to continue his reading of the novel until his father disappeared from his sight. Everything would go on the same way.

"No! I won't let it happen!" Ganesha told himself and suddenly got up. He chanted, "Bastard! Bastard!" He wore his knee-length dhoti and covered himself with a blanket. It was cold outside! The key to the sanctum sanctorum was near his father's pillow. Was it under it? Or outside? If his father apprehended him and killed him, it was fine. Slowly, he groped around his father's pillow. God's Mercy! He found it, next to

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[1–3]spicy dishes and snacks that are taboo to an orthodox Brahmin.

the pillow and not under it. He felt his way to the kitchen. If his fiendish step-mother were to ask, "What are you doing?" he planned to say, "I want to drink some water." And to forestall any suspicion, he did drink some water. He picked up noiselessly the crowbar lying next to the grinding stone. He opened the rear door. Damned door! It creaked a little. He heard his father cursing, half-asleep. Ganesha used a ploy to suggest that he was going to the latrine. He hit the jug against the water-boiler, poured some water into a bucket and lifted the bucket noisily to convince his father that he really was on his way to the latrine. He shut the rear door and went straight to the temple.

There were beggars still awake around the temple compound. He thought what fools these pilgrims were, arriving by special buses at the dead of night for the next day's Chariot Festival. Fearing that someone might suspect him, if he had the blanket on, he threw it to one of the beggars under a tree and proceeded. People known to him would assume that he was going to the temple on some business, because he was the chief priest's son. If somebody were to ask about the crowbar, he could say he needed it to dig holes for lamp-posts.

Ganesha opened the big door and closed it after him, No one was there. Darkness. Silence. He opened the inner door and entered. He bolted the door from the inside. Two burning lamps. Big mask over the Manjunatha's lingam—a mask that featured a gentle smile. Golden crown on its head. Ganesha had spent most of his life since his scared thread ceremony, in this place! How easy it all looked!

What nonsense they blabbered! They said that it was eternal, that at eighteen feet deep, there were nine precious gems and gold coins buried in the hole guarded by eight charmed circles—his father's sterile mythology. Everything there should be destroyed, uprooted. Otherwise, Ganesha would be destroyed. There was no other way at all! When Jagannatha Rao brought the untouchables into the temple, he would shout,

"Listen! Everything has been destroyed here, we are free at last!"

Using the crowbar, Ganesha dug the ground around the lingam. He perspired. That there was a considerable crack under the idols, was known only to him and and his father. But

somehow, Nagaraja Jois had got wind of it. How? Ganesha's father had strongly denied that there was a crack.

The sound of the crowbar's pounding made him feel as if his heart was being pounded. If his father were to come here now, he would be killed on the spot. Or he would kill his father. The lingam got damaged by the blows of the crowbar. Whether or not someone saw him did not matter. Determined, he went ahead and dug all around the lingam.

He was scared by a rat scurrying over his feet. When he tried to kill it, it escaped into the drain, meant to carry away the holy water. "Let there be death! Let there be death!" Ganesha chanted and dug like a man possessed.

The lingam came off its pedestal. He gathered it in a piece of cloth that his father had spread. He picked up the bundle, closed the door, and as it was not heavy he carried it and the crowbar straight to the river. There were people even on the river bank. But no one recognized him. He dumped the lingam and his father's sancified cloth into the sin-cleansing pond and then walked home.

His body was wet with perspriation. Ganesha was not conscious of himself till he reached the rear of his house. As he was about to push the rear door open to step in, he sensed that there was someone facing him in the dark, and his heart sank.

"Where have you been all this time, wretched one?" His father roared and his hand slapped Ganesha's burning face, and Ganesha's head reeled. He had perhaps got up to relieve himself and discovered Ganesha's long absence. Ganesha was hardly aware of what he was doing. He threw the crowbar at his father. He did not know where it had hit his father, but hearing his father scream, "Ayyo!" he ran out. Not knowing where to go and fearing that Jagannatha Rao's house was too far, he went straight back into the sanctum sanctorum and collapsed on the floor. Everything was so still that he could hear his heart beating. His father had not followed him. He exclaimed, "Ah, mother!" sighed, closed his eyes and stretched his legs. Saying to himself that he would stay there till Jagannatha and the untouchables arrived the next day, and breathing through his mouth, Ganesha lay still on the stone floor.

TWENTY-FIVE

The day after the Festival, Jagannatha sat down and scanned the special issue of the newspaper, *Jagruti*.

"Revolution That Failed. Jagannatha Rao's Resolve Undeterred." He did not feel like reading the rest. The people who had besieged his house were still shouting. The police were tired of blowing the whistle, pushing and holding off the crowd. How absurd their slogans were!

"Victory to Ganesha Bhatta!"

"Shame on the atheist!"

Besides, there was the bhajan, '*Manjunatha, the Victor! Bhootharaya, Ganesha Bhatta, the Victor! God of Gods! the Victor!*'

Jagannatha looked out of the window. Mostly new faces! The comical part about the whole scene was that some young men were using the same posters they had used the previous day except that the slogans stated exactly the opposite.

"Let go of Ganesha Bhatta, the defender of God's glory!" Jagannatha laughed. Poor soul! Ananthakrishna's voice was getting hoarse by speaking incessantly. No, only Sripathi Rao was left to pacify the crowd. Jagannatha thought that it was necessary for him to go down and help. Just then, Neelakantaswamy came running and said, "It seems to me that the right thing to do is to send Ganesha home."

Jagannatha, uncomfortable at Neelakantaswamy's uprooting of selected strands of his hair, told him, "Please sit down." After Neelakantaswamy sat down, Jagannatha spoke calmly.

"That is impossible."

"Do you know that Prabhu has a scheme worked out? People might now be viewing Ganesha as an incarnation of Bhootharaya. But Prabhu is worried about what would happen if Ganesha were to contradict them later. Naturally. It appears therefore that Prabhu plans to lodge a complaint that, abetted by us, Ganesha has stolen gold from the temple."

Ranga Rao and Ananthakrishna also came upstairs. Ananthakrishna, pulling at the khadi wrap round his neck, said to Jagannatha. "Issue a statement before Prabhu issues his, that there is no link between our non-violent struggle and Ganesha's hostile act of uprooting the lingam and throwing it away. Maybe, later..."

"No. No. I am indirectly responsible for Ganesha's act." Jagannatha said this as he watched through the window the crowd that believed Ganesha to be Bhootharaya's incarnation. Who was responsible for the new demonic frenzy? Ranga Rao came close to him and said in a gently persuasive tone,

"No, Mr. Jagannatha Rao. It is not right tactics to antagonize all the Hindus. Just say this in your statement. Ganesha was crazed when he acted violently. That way, we won't be saying that what he did was right, thus provoking people of all castes to pounce on us."

Ananthakrishna agreed. "That would also mean answering this ignorant crowd that Ganesha is just a crazed young man."

Neelakantaswamy made the argument finer still, "Ganesha had a personal quarrel with God. His was not an ideological rebellion like ours. Therefore, it won't be wrong for us to dissociate ourselves from his neurotic act."

Ananthakrishna agreed.

"That's really what happened anyway. Ganesha opened the door after you spoke to him. Whatever he told you and whatever the people heard, is immaterial now because the rumour that Bhootharaya possessed Ganesha and prompted him to do this has caught on. These mad people jumped in joy claiming that Manjunatha was not in the temple when the untouchables entered it. Everything got out of control. What can we do? It's the nature of this dammed soil!"

In his anguish that his plan had turned into a fiasco, Jagannatha had a bleak vision — of Ganesha, seated on the platform in a daze, with a mound of vermilion in front of him, with so unblinking a stare and that he did not even bother to chase the mosquitoes that hovered around his lips. Devotees, after offering their prayers to Manjunatha, would come to him to take a pinch of vermilion. In course of time, Pilla or his son would become a minister. He would come to Bharathipura

to unveil Jagannatha's portrait. Jagannatha would be in some corner writing about revolution. Probably in Delhi. Probably with Margaret. Ganesha, an old man then, would still be sitting on the temple platform. Or if he were to die, the board on which he sat would be accorded the worship due to him. They would build a girls' school in Jagannatha's name. As time passed and the town progressed, electric lights would beam in the sanctum sanctorum of Manjunatha's temple.

Prabhu would lecture to the people praising Jagannatha. The people, now screaming against him, would then clap their hands and cheer.

Jagannatha, worried that Rao might not be able to hold off the crowd much longer, stood up. Neelakantaswamy warned him. "People might get into a rage seeing you." Jagannatha replied, "These people are not even capable of intense rage," and started down the steps. Just then, a police inspector arrived. He had in his hand a warrant for Ganesha's arrest. Prabhu had lodged a complaint that Ganesha had assaulted the temple and stolen God's gold. What a cunning rogue Prabhu was! The inspector asked Jagannatha politely to hand Ganesha over to him. Jagannatha asked the inspector to sit down and said,

"Ganesha's mind is unhinged."

"We know that, sir. But we are unable to control the crowd. They refuse to move from your house. You can have Ganesha released on bail later. You may then admit him to a hospital. The District Commissioner has personally asked us to tell you this."

Jagannatha was silent. Two policemen walked the dazed Ganesha over. He did not seem to be conscious of anything. He walked peering at things. The minute they saw him, the people gathered began to chant his praises and surrounded the police van. People even ran after the van as it sped away.

Jagannatha sighed and went back in. Rao, Neelakantaswamy and Ananthakrishna followed him. Ranga Rao spoke to the young socialist and chased away a few remaining demonstrators. It was the out-of-town pilgrims who posed the biggest problem. Ranga Rao asked the police to continue their vigil and came up.

Jagannatha asked Gopala when he had to go back to Mysore and paced about the hall, trying to recall and understand every

moment from the minute he had left his house the previous day. All the ten untouchables dressed in white gathered early in the morning in the yard under Pilla's leadership. The minute he came close to them, Jagannatha could smell liquor. To face the ordeal they had drunk heavily. When he told them, "You should not be afraid," Pilla said, laughing with bravado, "Oh no!"

Jagannatha realized that entering the temple in their condition was not a conscious act of free will, but stood there helpless because it was too late to step back. He had again become a helpless witness. Was he afraid then? Did he concede that it was impossible to sustain purity in collective action? He went upstairs feeling that even this post-mortem was meaningless.

Rao, Neelakantaswamy, Ananthakrishna and Ranga Rao, sitting on a mat, were engaged in a deep discussion. Chikki brought coffee and kodubale on a platter and left. His companions were trying to be thorough in their discussion of the previous day's happenings. They stopped when they saw the day's newspaper from Bangalore. Neelakantaswamy was delighted to see that their action had made front-page news. Reading the headlines eagerly, Neelakantaswamy commented, "This P.R.T. is a rascal, a reactionary. He twists and slants news. *Jagruti* does better reporting." He began reading aloud:

Failed Revolution in Bharathipura! Untouchables enter the godless temple. We won't withdraw from the battle says Jagannatha Rao. Bhootharaya prevents God from being desecrated.

Ananthakrishna, leaning forward to take a look at the paper, said, "Continue reading." Rao opened his betel leaf bag and prepared mixture ready to chew. He listened intently. Jagannatha suddenly remembered, "Are the police guarding the untouchables?"

Ranga Rao said enthusiastically, "There are ten to twelve police guards. I saw Pilla and asked him to come to this evening's meeting."

Jagannatha thought that none of them understood his anguish. Nor did they need to. They were doers. It was easy for them to be doing things. How intently they were all listening to Neelakantaswamy's reading! Perhaps they had the

illusion that their action had become real in the reporting of it. Neelakantaswamy read gladly:

Bharathipura is lovely in the morning when sunlight sweeps away the mist like a broom. This play was enacted in front of people from many parts, who were waiting in the cold for the Chariot Festival to begin. Manjunatha, whose devotees include the nation's President, has Bhootharaya as his liege. The eagerness to see whether the untouchables would cross the line of Bhootharaya's authority was shining in their eyes, curiosity exceeding even their eagerness.

Jagannatha was irritated. Ranga Rao was impressed and said, "Well written," Jagannatha commented, "It is immoral to write like that," and sat listening and smoking a cigarette. Neelakantaswamy read:

It was seven in the morning when the procession of neatly clad untouchables under Mr. Jagannatha Rao's leadership marching to destroy Manjunatha's glory, reached Chariot Street. Following it, a car, blaring victory slogans on the mike— 'Inquilab Zindabad' and 'Victory to Mysore Socialist Party'. This revolutionary chant in Bharathipura where for centuries only Vedic chants had rung.

During the reading, Neelakantaswamy's face shrank and his voice grew feeble. Jagannatha had felt so embarrassed to hear his name on the mike that he had come back to the car and taken Neelakantaswamy to task. He instructed them most strictly that the march should be peaceful and quiet. Jagannatha noticed that the disappointment felt then by Neelakantaswamy was still burning within him, and to show that he had forgotten that incident, Jagannatha bowed his head and said nothing. It was only for a moment though that Neelakantaswamy felt unsure. He continued reading after that:

Police on both sides. In the front line of the march, Jagannatha Rao, London-returned, member of the temple trustee family. Behind him, ten untouchable young men followed by veteran Congress leader, Sripathi Rao. Following Rao, the Sarvodaya Ananthakrishna, Mysore Socialist Party leader, Neelakantaswamy and his followers.

All faces blossomed except Ranga Rao's. He told Jagannatha, "This prose without verbs is irritating." Ananthakrishna agreed with him.

"They are misusing Siddavanhalli's prose style." The reading continued:

Crowds made way for the march because if they were touched by the untouchables, they would lose their right to pull the chariot. The marchers went past the decorated chariot and climbed the stairs of the temple. Commotion everywhere! The uproar of policemen pushing back the mob.

A village woman shouted in a frenzy, 'Untouchables won't be allowed to go in. Bhootharaya will pull them back by their feet. He will make them vomit blood.'

Jagannatha sighed, at the reporting. He then went back to his room. Neelakantaswamy went on reading. Jagannatha looked out of the window. A mango tree in blossom. A few people coming up the hill to take a curious look at the atheist. Police trying to stop them. Jagannatha had not envisaged the moment he was facing now. Though he had imagined things getting somewhat out of control, he had not anticipated anything like this.

Pilla was standing near the temple threshold. Jagannatha waited for the historic step that would change the course of centuries. Just one step that would take Pilla over and across the threshold. Jagannatha knew that thousands of eyes were pulling Pilla back. He looked at Pilla with eyes that rejected the cruelty and ignorance of those thousands. He looked at Pilla as if to say that it was he and not anyone else who should take this step. It was strange that Jagannatha felt as much curiosity as anxiety. Curiosity about whether Pilla was ready. Perhaps Pilla's alcoholic stupor had subsided. Jagannatha waited with longing for Pilla to take just one single step and change the reality of Bharathipura. He tried to tell Pilla that unless he became strong, he, Jagannatha would not be strong. He stood there searching Pilla's eyes, as a witness, as a partner and as an instrument of history. But Pilla turned back and looked at his companions. He saw the thousands who were watching him. He asked the one behind him to go in first. That young man asked the next in line to go in first. The same way, every one

asked the one behind him, and soon they were in a huddle. Each tried to sweet-talk the other into taking the first step and they started quarrelling.

What did Jagannatha think of doing then? Why did he simply stand there like a man entranced?

Neelakantaswamy criticized P.R.T's newspaper account severely. "Look, how subtly this reactionary has exaggerated things!"

He continued reading:

Suddenly a profound change like lightning in the crowd. Someone shouted. 'Victory to Manjunatha'! 'Govindanugovinda Govinda![1]' Another screamed, 'March ahead. Pull him down!'

Some danced in joy realizing the distress of the untouchables. Some wept. Some others trembled as if Bhootharaya had possessed them. The news that Bhootharaya had triumphed in immobilizing the untouchables spread all over town. Peoples' joy spilled over and they broke the police lines and ran.

Jagannatha, who had come out of his room, stood listening to the report. True, he was standing at the temple with folded arms. Neelakantaswamy did what he himself could not do. Hissing, Neelakantaswamy had gone to Pilla and grabbed him by his hand and dragged him into the temple. The others had followed. The formality of temple breaking was thus over and done with.

Neelakantaswamy was now reading the report with real anger:

When asked whether they approved of this forced entry, one of the organizers, the Sarvodaya leader, Ananthakrishna, replied, 'It is a matter of opinion — whether they were forced in the end to enter the temple!' But from Mr. Jagannatha, who stood there watching everything, the answer to my question was a sorrowful silence. 'No, Mr. Jagannatha, you should issue a statement denying this.' Mr. Jagannatha then said, 'My dilemma right now is whether the successful operation of my purpose with whatever means is significant. Until this confusion is cleared, I cannot say anything. But I do know this much — that this

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[1] a choral chant invoking God.

confusion too will be cleared through further action and not through thinking.'

Jagannatha went back to his room and again stood near the window. He saw Subraya Adiga coming at a distance. He went down fearing that the police might stop him, assessing his strange attire.

Would he have done what Neelakantaswamy did at the temple? In any case, what had he been doing all along? Not visualizing the possibility of this absurd end was the chief flaw in his thought process.

When Jagannatha went in with the untouchables, the spectacle inside was bizarre. Prabhu and Seetharamaiah were in front of the sanctum sanctorum. Seetharamaiah's head was bandaged. It now appeared to Jagannatha that the anxiety he saw in their faces yesterday was caused by their failure to get Ganesha to open the door in spite of their pleading, raging and kicking in distress. Ganesha was in no state to say anything clear or sensible.

When Seetharamaiah shouted, "The untouchables have come. Don't open the door!" Jagannatha suspected that something untoward had happened. Prabhu play-acted by saying, "What shall we do? Seetharamaiah's son, prompted by God's Will has locked himself inside the sanctum sanctorum. He refuses to open the door."

Jagannatha went straight to the door, knocked on it and said, "Ganesha, it's me. Jagannatha. Don't be afraid, open the door." The door opened. Ganesha staggered to where Jagannatha was standing and collapsed near his feet.

As Jagannatha was thus recalling the previous day's strange events, Subraya Adiga came, and showing no emotion, said, "I came to see Chikki." Jagannatha sent him in, saying, "She is in," and went upstairs. The discussion there was fierce. Neelakantaswamy was speaking assertively, "Listen to this report."

Manjunatha vanished miraculously because the untouchables were entering his temple—this news spread among the people. Neelakantaswamy announced on the mike that the one who uprooted

and threw away the lingam was Ganesha Bhatta, son of the chief priest. But people believed that Bhootharaya had possessed Ganesha Bhatta the previous night and thus managed to take away the lingam for safe-keeping under water and prevented the desecration of the Manjunatha temple. They jumped up and down in ecstasy. The Indian's faith in God is so deep...

Neelakantaswamy was incensed reading this report. He said, "This rascal, P.R.T., speaks only of faith in God. Has he reported what I said then? I said, 'Don't become victims of sterile myths. Jagannatha Rao and Ganesha Bhatta are both revolutionaries. One day, the conspiracy of the priests and merchants to turn the revolution into myth will prove fruitless. The victimization of the farmers by Bhootharaya will have to stop. What has happened here really is the beginning of the revolution.' I said all that. Has P.R.T. mentioned a single thing from my statement? Some in the crowd did believe in what I said. Ranga Rao here is my witness."

Jagannatha came down and paced about the yard. The meeting was just a few minutes away. Pilla, his companions, perhaps some other untouchables as well, might come to the meeting. Ranga Rao had announced a meeting of all the oppressed through the papers. That was another struggle — uniting the untouchables and exploited farmers, victims all.

His friends were carrying on the discussion animatedly. Jagannatha went in to wash his face, thinking of the decisions to be taken at the meeting. Adiga was describing to Chikki the preparations that were going on in order to reinstall Lord Manjunatha at the temple.

MODERN INDIAN NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

Violent and unexpected events follow when Jagannatha, a rich Brahmin landlord educated in England returns to his extremely traditional small town. In attempting a social revolution by leading the low-caste folk (untouchables) into the temple, Jagannatha tries to win an inner growth and freedom he lacked.

U.R. Anantha Murthy (1932) was born in Meliga, Karnataka and holds degrees in literature from Indian and British Universities. One of the leading writers of fiction in Kannada, his first novel *Samskara* was received as a classic, translated and filmed. His short stories, poems, novels and plays attracted the highest literary honour in India — the Jnanpith Award.

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